Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's American Trilogy

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Abstract

This thesis examines Philip Roth's American trilogy – *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* – with emphasis on the narrator/author, long-standing Roth character Nathan Zuckerman.

I argue that the most fruitful reading of the trilogy is one that constantly keeps in mind that significant portions of the plot are imagined – or "authored" – by this familiar character. Such a reading is aware of how the American trilogy both "rewrites" the previous Zuckerman fictions, and turns the stories of the three novels' respective protagonists, Seymour "Swede" Levov, Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk, into useful fictions through which Zuckerman can explore how the myth of America corresponds to the realities of postwar history.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I summarize the plot in each novel and make my case for a Zuckerman-centred reading. In Chapter 2, I map out who Zuckerman is and describe the transformation he has gone through when we encounter him in the American trilogy. In Chapter 3, I analyze the narrative strategy in each novel, and discuss the implications of the way Zuckerman explicitly brings the narrative process to our attention. In Chapter 4, I analyze thematically the decline of postwar America we are presented with in the trilogy. And in Chapter 5, I discuss the trilogy's view of the human condition – what Zuckerman has learned in the narrative process.

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Oslo, May 2006.
Stian Stang Christiansen

Contents

Chapter 1: Philip Roth's American trilogy

> "Oh, if only I could have imagined the scene I'd overheard! If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life!"
>
> Nathan Zuckerman, *The Ghost Writer*.

1.1: Introduction

In his 1960 essay "Writing American Fiction", Philip Roth wrote that "the American writer … has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination." (*Reading* 167) What he proposed as a "solution" to this problem was to disregard society and turn the self into the subject of American fiction. Because, he maintained, "the social world has ceased to be as suitable or as manageable a subject as it once may have been". (172) In a broad sense, the "blueprint" presented in "Writing American Fiction" was the one Roth followed for his own fiction for three decades.

However, towards the end of the 1990s, Roth seemed to face the challenge he shied away from in 1960, that of describing and making credible American reality: From 1997 to 2000, he published three novels – *American Pastoral*, *I Married A Communist* and *The Human Stain* – that together formed a loose trilogy[1]. In an interview with The New York Times, Roth said: "I think of it as a thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation." ("McGrath Interview"[2]) The moments he has in mind are the McCarthy era of the 1950s, the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s, and the impeachment of President Clinton in the late 1990s. Each novel tells the story of how the destiny of its protagonist is shaped and intertwined with these historical events. Furthermore, all three novels are narrated by Roth's long-serving literary alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman – one of the selves that has already served as a subject in several previous Roth novels. Hence the novels in the trilogy in a way merge both the

[1] In 2005, the trilogy was also published in one volume as *The American Trilogy* in the Everyman's Library series.
[2] References without page numbers refer to articles from the Internet.

challenge of the 1960 essay with its tentative solution: That of describing and making credible American reality, but through a specific subject, a subject that Roth had already investigated thoroughly and made his readers familiar with.

1.2: The Stories

In the following I will give a brief outline of the story in each novel. However, the novels are not only narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, but to a large degree *authored* by him as well: In both *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, he quickly starts to expand upon the "facts" and lets his imagination run free with the stories of Swede Levov and Coleman Silk. I will return to the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" and the process by they which are intertwined in Chapter 3. For now, "fact" and "fiction" are left blurred, and these are outlines of the stories as Nathan Zuckerman imagines them.

American Pastoral

In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman – once a womanizing celebrity-writer, now a hermit in the New England mountains – encounters his childhood hero, Seymour "Swede" Levov. Back in Newark in the 1940s, the Swede had been "the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews" (4) – the boy most likely to leave every trace of the Old World behind and blend effortlessly into Wasp America. And on the surface he does just that – at least for a while: The Swede becomes a successful businessman as owner of the Newark Maid glove factory he inherits from his father Lou. He marries (initially against his father's wishes) Dawn, an Irish Catholic and former Miss New Jersey, and together they go to live in a centuries-old colonial stone house in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, surrounded by Mayflower descendants. Then Dawn gives birth to a girl, Meredith "Merry" Levov. They are in other words living an American pastoral idyll. Until the mid-1960s, that is, when Merry becomes a teenager, and is deeply shocked by seeing a Vietnamese Buddhist monk's self-immolation on television. Then she grows into an anti-war radical, starts mingling with the more drastic segments of the antiwar movement in New York and eventually blows up the local post office (the closest thing she can find to a federal building) in order to "[b]ring the war home" to Old Rimrock. (112) Unfortunately she murders the local doctor in the process. She disappears and the Swede's life, and all the pastoral illusions he had maintained about

it, starts to come apart. Still, he manages to keep up the appearance of being complacent and satisfied, while the business' headquarters in Newark is ruined, and while his wife starts having an affair with Wasp neighbor Bill Orcutt. When his daughter finally re-emerges five years later, she has killed two more people, and lives emaciated in a dilapidated part of Newark. Eventually the Swede divorces and re-marries, has two sons, and dies of prostrate cancer.

However, before the Swede dies, Zuckerman briefly has the time to reacquaint himself with him. But the facts of the Swede's biography upon which he bases his narrative he gets from the Swede's younger brother Jerry at a high school reunion party. The novel is Zuckerman's meditation on how to make sense of the Swede's life; it is his effort to work out the anatomy of the Swede's Fall.

I Married a Communist

In *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman encounters his old high school English teacher, the now ninety-year-old Murray Ringold. He is the brother of another boyhood hero, radio actor Ira "Iron Rinn" Ringold, a star back in the 50s who had his career and life ruined by McCarthyism and the Blacklists. However, he actually *was* a card carrying member of the Communist Party. Nathan learns from Murray that because of his friendship with Ira, his own early academic career was impeded by the McCarthyists. That becomes the spur for him to have several all-night conversations with Murray, mapping out Ira's life, and in doing so, mapping out an anatomy of betrayal. Ira starts life practically an orphan and a lone Jew in the predominantly Italian First Ward of Newark. He rises from being a menial laborer to become a radio actor due to his impressive stature and ability to imitate Abraham Lincoln at union rallies. He eventually marries an over-the-hill silent movie star, Eve Frame, but instead of attaining a healthy family life, he gets caught in the crossfire between Eve and her grown-up but chronically vexed daughter, Sylphid. Eventually, when the Blacklists appear with Ira's name on them, the marriage goes permanently sour, and Eve publishes a tell-all memoir about the abominable Communist nature of her husband – naturally entitled *I Married a Communist* – ghost-written by the Wasps from hell, socialite couple Bryden Grant and Katherina Van Tassel Grant. Ira spends the rest of his days in arthritic pain in a shack in the New Jersey sticks. Interspersed with the narrative of Ira's rise and fall comes the tale of the young Zuckerman's progress from

young aspiring writer of patriotic radio plays to a more refined artist. And his first step towards attaining this sense of refinement is betraying his hero – Ira.

The Human Stain

In *The Human Stain*, we encounter Zuckerman's neighbor, the Jewish academic Coleman Silk. He has been forced to resign from his position as professor and former dean at Athena College because of an alleged racial slur – "spooks" – he has used to characterize two permanently absent students. The charge, however, is absurd; he meant spooks as in specter and not as an archaic derogative term for black person. But in the politically correct climate at the college, no one dares to stand up for Coleman. When his wife Iris dies of a stroke, Coleman is convinced that it was the scandal that killed her, and he approaches Zuckerman to ask for help in completing his planned book about his downfall, naturally entitled *Spooks*, a book he himself is unable to finish. The two of them strike up a friendship, and Zuckerman learns that Coleman is having an affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman at the college. She is a poor, supposedly illiterate woman who recently experienced the death of her two children in a fire. When Coleman's nemesis at the college, the young French academic Delphine Roux, head of the Department of Languages and Literature, discovers Coleman's affair with Faunia, he becomes even more of a pariah than he had previously been. Eventually, Coleman and Faunia are killed in a car accident, and Zuckerman is convinced that Lester Farley, Faunia's deranged former husband, a Vietnam veteran, has had a hand in the accident. Eventually, Zuckerman turns out a book, but not the one Coleman requested; it is written after Coleman's death, and it is *The Human Stain*, the book we are reading. Its origin is a revelation Zuckerman has at Coleman's funeral when he encounters a black woman at the grave, and realizes that she is Coleman's sister Ernestine: That, in fact, Coleman had been a black man passing as a Jew – something he had done ever since he as a young man had lost the (white) love of his life, Steena, who did not have the strength to embark on a mixed marriage in 1950s America. This causes Zuckerman to re-evaluate every assumption he has had about Coleman, and that re-evaluation is the novel.

1.3: The Thesis

The last ten years – since the publication of *Sabbath's Theater* in 1995 and the subsequent publication of the American trilogy – has seen a renewal of critical interest in Roth's work; not only his recent output, but indeed his entire *oeuvre* has been reassessed. For example: Recent issues of the journals *Shofar* and *Studies in American-Jewish Literature* have in their entirety been dedicated to Roth's portrayal of America. The bi-annual journal *Philip Roth Studies*, published by Heldref Publications, has seen the light of day, and an issue of the French journal *Profils Américains* has been dedicated to Roth. Add to that several book-length studies[3] on Roth's fiction which have been published over the last five years – and quite a few which are on the way in the foreseeable future. Not to mention the countless book chapters and journal articles published in the last decade.

Argument

However, no one has yet, to my knowledge, tried to read the entire American trilogy from the point of view of the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman – though there has of course been publications that have dealt with this subject. Where appropriate, I will discuss the arguments of that research. (I am thinking particularly of Debra Shostak's *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, Derek Parker-Royal's "Fictional Realms of Possibility", Timothy L. Parrish's "The End of Identity" and Mark Maslan's "The Faking of the Americans".)

With this thesis, I want to advocate a reading that keeps in mind that significant portions of these novels are kept on the level of commentary by the Zuckerman character. What are the implications of having this familiar character tell the stories of three other Jewish Newark[4] natives and their destinies in postwar America, not just through a conventional narrative, but by "remembering" – i.e. imagining – their stories for them?

I argue that this narrative method makes it possible to read two thematic tendencies out of the American trilogy:

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[3] Derek Parker-Royal, Mark Shechner, Debra Shostak, Harold Bloom and Jay Halio & Ben Siegel have all recently written/edited books on Roth. See the bibliography for more detailed information.
[4] Actually, Coleman hails from East Orange, which part of Greater Newark. And, of course, he only poses as a Jew.

On the one hand, it can be read as a continuation and re-evaluation of the "Zuckerman ordeal"[5], the previous novels about Zuckerman. Therefore one should perhaps not believe him when he says that "my seclusion is not the story. It is not the story in any way … I don't want a story any longer. I've had my story." (*Communist* 71) Zuckerman's own story *is* an issue here, and I argue that he rewrites the story of himself, obliquely, through the stories of Seymour "Swede" Levov and Coleman Silk, and to some extent the story of Ira Ringold, because the arc of their stories resembles his. And by working out the reasons for their downfall – not the Truth with a capital T, but what could have happened – Zuckerman can explain to himself the reasons for his own downfall.

On the other hand, the trilogy can be read as Zuckerman's attempt to recreate in fiction what he sees disappearing from reality. He makes repeated references to how his role as narrator is "to record what might otherwise be forgotten". (*Pastoral* 30) What will soon be forgotten is, for instance, the very generation to which he belongs; his point of origin, *his* Newark, which only remains as a vestige in his memory; and the hopes that his generation once harbored for America. I argue that the stories of the Swede, Coleman and Ira can be read as "useful fictions"[6] through which Zuckerman investigates how the rewards America once seemed to hold in store, in the immediate postwar period, vanished; how these rewards were destroyed by the forces of history. Zuckerman's three protagonists all encounter tragedy, and he wants to know if they do so as a result of their actions, or if tragedy is bestowed upon them by history, regardless of whether or not it was deserved. He sets out to find out through his narratives.

Method

In Chapter 2, "The Narrator", I begin by discussing how the Zuckerman we are presented with in the trilogy – where we find him "now", at the point of narration – corresponds to what we already know about him from previous novels. Can certain

[5] This phrase is Harold Bloom's, describing *Zuckerman Bound*; he insists that it "cannot be called saga". (Bloom 3)

[6] The phrase is taken from Roth's 1975 novel *My Life as a Man*, where the name Nathan Zuckerman appears for the first time. Zuckerman is the name of the protagonist in two stories – "useful fictions" – written "by" the protagonist of that novel, Peter Tarnopol. Through these "useful fictions", Tarnopol attempts to make sense of the predicament he finds himself in.

thematic lines be drawn from these earlier novels to the American trilogy, and can such lines shed new light both ways? I try to uncover what Zuckerman's motives as narrator are, and, even though he has gone through some transformations, I will argue that the entire Zuckerman ordeal adds up to a whole. This chapter is something of a digression, in that it moves away from the texts that are the object of this study, but one that is rewarded because it gives fresh perspectives on the narratives of the trilogy.

The narratives are the subject of Chapter 3, "Reimagining American Lives". I am primarily concerned with the role of Zuckerman as narrator *and* author. By that, I mean the effect that is achieved by having the well-known, but altered, character Zuckerman narrate the stories of the other characters, while simultaneously making clear that most of what we read is made up – or "remembered" – by the narrator. In other words, *he starts to author the stories he initially reports*. At times the transition from "reportage" to "fiction" is almost seamless in the trilogy, at other times the narrator openly discusses the transition, making it plain that the action is really happening on the level of commentary, thus turning the plot into a series of what-ifs. I argue that the narratives are Zuckerman's "useful fictions" – testing grounds on which he can examine the consequences of having one's life story intertwined with the events of postwar history. I am primarily concerned with the macro level of the 1,000-plus pages of text that constitute the American trilogy, but through frequent close readings at micro level I try to illustrate the effect produced by Zuckerman's narrative strategies.

In Chapter 4, "The Anatomy of the Fall", I attempt to lift the gaze of the reading and write a thematic analysis of the decline of postwar America we are presented with in the trilogy. "The Fall" is the title of one of the sections of *American Pastoral*, but I argue that it is a phrase that covers the thematic thrust of the entire trilogy. The aging Zuckerman has realized that living inevitably is a messy affair, that *the human stain* cannot be eradicated from life; and that we betray as easily as we breathe – each other, our ideals, ourselves. And what he sees as the key to the Fall is our adherence to purity, our urge to purge life of the human stain. I argue that both the young Zuckerman and his three protagonists succumb to the urge to purify their lives by believing in the newness of America, the myth of America as virgin land: They all set out to recreate themselves from scratch, turning themselves into new men – American Adams – by severing themselves from and betraying their pasts, as embodied

by their tribes/families But this is at odds with another, even greater urge to purify which, for Zuckerman, reaches manic levels in the ideologies that are formative in creating the "we [of] … the present moment" (*Stain* 336), i.e. the forces of history in the half-century the trilogy spans. I argue that in Zuckerman's worldview, the urge to purify is the foundation of McCarthyism, Communism, 60s leftwing radicalism, and the PC-culture of the 90s, which has even seeped into the hegemonic theoretic discourse taught in universities. "The Fall" naturally implies a place or condition prior to it. And that somewhere can also be found in the trilogy, in Zuckerman's youth, in the Weequahic section of Newark in the 1940s and 50s. But I argue that there are numerous signs that it maybe is not the place, but rather that specific time of Zuckerman's life that is prelapsarian; before he and the Swede and Coleman ate of the tree of knowledge and seized being children, but became men and learned to know the evils of the world.

In Chapter 5, the conclusion, I discuss what view of the human condition is found in the trilogy – what Zuckerman has learned in the narrative process.

Chapter 2: The Narrator

> The prodigal son who once upset the tribal balance – and perhaps even invigorated the tribe's health – may well, in his old age, have a sentimental urge to go back home ...
>
> Nathan Zuckerman to Philip Roth, *The Facts*.

2.1: Who Is Zuckerman?

Nathan Zuckerman is Philip Roth's longest-serving literary alter ego. He first appears in a section of *My Life as a Man* (1975), in two stories – "useful fictions" – written "by" that novel's protagonist, Peter Tarnopol. He morphs into a fully fledged protagonist in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), followed by *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) and the novella *The Prague Orgy* (1985). This trilogy plus the novella then appeared in one volume, entitled *Zuckerman Bound* (1985). Then Zuckerman appears to die in the formally experimental *The Counterlife* (1987), yet reappears alive and well in the closing part of Roth's autobiography *The Facts* (1988), writing – on an intriguing metafictional level – a letter to Roth, urging his author to stay with fiction rather than autobiography.

Zuckerman vs. Roth

Nathan Zuckerman can of course not be equated with Philip Roth, though one could be forgiven for seeing him – as many critics have – in the *Zuckerman Bound* books, as a thinly veiled version of the author: Zuckerman is Roth's age; he's Jewish; he's from Newark; he's a writer; he eventually becomes the (scandalous) author of a bestselling licentious novel called *Carnovsky*, which bears a striking resemblance to *Portnoy's Complaint*; he engages in a public and private spat with one of his intellectual elders, Milton Appel, very much like the one Roth engaged in with Irving Howe[7], etcetera. Ironically, one of the key themes of the first Zuckerman trilogy is the fallacy of such assumptions – equating the artist with the work of art. It is, however, useful to regard Zuckerman as a caricature of Roth. He has got a number of Roth's traits – but the

[7] Having reviewed Roth's first few books positively, Irving Howe, after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, wrote a scathing piece entitled "Philip Roth Reconsidered" in *Commentary*. This critical

volume is cranked up to eleven; or, as Zuckerman himself notes in his "letter" to Roth in *The Facts*, Zuckerman is someone "through whom you can detach yourself from your biography at the same time that you exploit its crises, themes, tensions, and surprises". (*Facts* 161)

The Previous Zuckerman Books

The *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy charts Nathan Zuckerman's trajectory: He starts out as a serious young writer who has just published a few stories which, to his astonishment, have upset his family and community because of their frank description of Jewish daily life in middle-class New Jersey. Then he becomes a scandalous, movie-star-dating literary celebrity, famous for charting the libido of the Jewish man in his fiction, and he is disowned by his father on his deathbed – "Bastard" is the last word ever uttered by Zuckerman senior. He ends up a washed-out, drugged-up womanizer with a severe case of writer's block, a wrecking-ball on the loose, desperate to turn his life around. Broadly speaking, *Zuckerman Bound* can be said to be novels about fiction writing and its consequences. Or as Roth himself has said: "What are the real consequences ... of a work of art? … What ripples really are produced when you drop a book into the great puddle? [Zuckerman] drops these fictions into the stream, and things happen… All kinds of repercussions and reverberations…" ("BBC interview") In *The Ghost Writer*, his art affects his relationship to his family; in *Zuckerman Unbound* his artistic success becomes a personal fiasco; and in *The Anatomy Lesson* he even suspects that his art is causing him physical pain. And in *The Prague Orgy*, Zuckerman encounters consequences of art that are different from any he has seen before, the effects of art in a closed society, which are "visible, profound, ghastly" ("BBC interview"). *The Counterlife* is more of an experiment with form, a novel about narrative possibilities, but even here his fictions have repercussions for his brother and his mistress (who eventually becomes his fourth wife).

The common denominator through all the books is that Zuckerman holds his vocation to be more important than anything – therein lies the comedy. But that attitude creates a major chasm between himself, his family and his tribe, and the rewards of artistic success turn out not to be all they were cracked up to be.

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u-turn by all accounts upset Roth. Roth has refuted that he is trying to settle literary scores in

Zuckerman's younger brother Henry probably says it best: "To you everything is disposable! Everything is *ex*posable! Jewish morality, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families – everything is grist for your fun-machine. Even your shiksas go down the drain when they don't tickle your fancy anymore." (*Bound* 287) (That last sentence is a reference to the long line – eventually four in total – of Mrs. Nathan Zuckermans.)

It is not my intention to write any sort of analysis of the first Zuckerman books. However, my contention is that some of the themes of the American trilogy – especially that of deserting the tribe in order to take part of the bounty of America, and the disappearance of the Newark of Zuckerman's youth – are also prominent in the first books. And that the American trilogy, though different in character and tone, does progress from the first Zuckerman books in a natural way, and by no means by accident (see below). The pain that lies at the basis of the first trilogy is the same that lies at the basis of the second. As Harold Bloom writes of *Zuckerman Bound*, "Roth's negative exuberance is not in the service of a negative theology, but intimates instead nostalgia for the morality once engendered by the Jewish normative tradition." And that the "pain of the relations" between the characters results from "the incommensurability between [this] rigorously moral normative tradition ... and the reality of the way we live now." (Bloom 2) This is equally true of the American trilogy. But here, where Zuckerman is an older man, in his 60s, what he has started to regard as morally normative are the values of the world of his youth, the neighborhood where he grew up – the very world he willfully deserted in the first trilogy. And herein lies the re-evaluation. Furthermore, the books in the American trilogy are, among other things, also fictions about the creation of fiction, though in a different way; it is the protagonists' fictions about their selves that are dropped into the stream of history, where they cause "[a]ll kinds of repercussions and reverberations".

2.2: Zuckerman's Transformation

Zuckerman was probably presumed to be "deceased" after *The Counterlife* and *The Facts*, as Roth in the early 1990s wrote a string of books (*Deception*, the memoir *Patrimony* and *Operation Shylock*) with "Philip Roth" as protagonist. Until *American Pastoral* (1997) appeared, that is. Whereas Zuckerman always had the starring role in

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Zuckerman Bound, see e.g. *Reading* 112.

the previous books, in the American trilogy, though he is the narrator, he is, at least at first glance, reduced to a bit-player in the plot of the novels. But the fact that these nevertheless are Zuckerman books is significant. He is not simply a mouthpiece for other people's stories; by telling these stories, he is elaborating on the story of himself, as we know it from the previous Zuckerman books.

Debra Shostak, in a recent study of Roth – *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives* – suggests that, in using Nathan Zuckerman as the narrator of the American trilogy, Roth

> … appears to have arrived at an ingenious solution to the artistic problem of bearing witness almost as if by *accident*, by way of his attraction to the narrating voice of his alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman the narrator develops ready-made out of the central, pseudo-autobiographical subject of the *Zuckerman Bound* fictions. (Shostak 232, my italics)

The word "accident" here seems misplaced. On the contrary, I think the choice of Zuckerman as narrator is the complete opposite of an accident. Shostak seems to suggest that it is almost as though Roth could not quite bear to write a trilogy of postwar destinies other than his own – or of a protagonist resembling himself – in America, and so he stumbled across an ingenious way of putting a lot of "himself" in there via the ready-made Zuckerman. I believe Robert Alter is more correct in saying that Roth's decision to let Zuckerman narrate is the result of a necessity. But Alter maintains that it is of a psychological rather than a formal nature:

> [I]t is as though [Roth] had to have a surrogate for himself, the Jewish-American novelist, a man who has grown up during World War II and come of age in the years of political paranoia and innocent social-economic optimism of the 50s, now a depleted veteran of decades of sexual warfare, to serve as a meditative – at times elegiac – observer of the evolving American scene represented in these novels. (Alter 27-28)

I think there is a very specific reason that this familiar character is both the narrator and "author" of this trilogy. The reason is that, with his having lived for the entire half-century the trilogy spans (circa 1945 – the odd analepsis disregarded – to 1998), the stories he is telling are as much about him as they are about his subjects. And *that* is the nature of the psychological necessity. However, that really makes it a formal necessity as well. Of course, one could imagine the stories of Swede, Ira and Coleman told without Zuckerman, but that would turn these novels into something completely different. The trajectories of Swede Levov and Coleman Silk mirror and resemble

Zuckerman's own; and the development of the young Zuckerman we follow in *I Married a Communist* gives us some important clues as to how he has ended up where he is as an older man. What the trajectories of Swede, Coleman, Zuckerman and, to some extent, Ira, have in common is their general movement away from the tribe and into America. They all start out with the assumption that the self is fluid, without a fixed base, and that it can be molded in any way desired. And what they all discover is that this assumption is false (this is a central theme that will be fully dealt with in the two following chapters). Furthermore, I think Zuckerman needs to re-evaluate himself through the narratives of other characters in order for the elegiac tone to come forth; his own story is too riddled with the picaresque.[8] That is why he has receded from his own biography – something he repeatedly emphasizes in the trilogy.

Zuckerman the Hermit

In *The Ghost Writer*, the young Zuckerman goes to se his idol E. I. Lonoff at his secluded house in the New England mountains. There, reflecting on the scenery, he thinks: "Purity. Serenity. Simplicity. Seclusion. All one's concentration and flamboyance and originality reserved for the grueling, exalted, transcendent calling. I looked around and I thought, This is how I will live." (*Bound* 4) Here the narrator, Zuckerman looking back with twenty years' hindsight, is mocking the young man's intentions to become a "serious" artist. And the next 1,000 or so pages of Zuckerman's story will reveal how he is sadly mistaken in assuming that his calling will be transcendent, and that he does not get to live like Lonoff at all.

Yet, when *American Pastoral* commences, he in fact does. As Igor Webb succinctly puts it, he has "out-Lonoffed Lonoff" (Webb 233). Zuckerman tells Jerry Levov that he lives:

> Up in the woods. About ten miles from a college town called Athena. I met a famous writer there when I was just starting out. Nobody mentions him much anymore, his sense of virtue is too narrow for readers now, but he was revered back then. Lived like a hermit. Reclusion looked awfully austere to a kid. He maintained it solved his problems. Now it solves mine." (*Pastoral* 63)

[8] I am now using Jean Starobinski's definition of the two types of tones present in the nostalgic text – the elegiac, which "expresses a lament for lost happiness", and the picaresque, in which "the past is a time of weakness, error, errancy, humiliation, and expedients". (Starobinski 179-180)

Of course, reclusion did not solve Lonoff's problems (*The Ghost Writer* ends with him having to chase his estranged wife in the New England winter night, begging for her forgiveness), and it shall not solve Zuckerman's either, he shall not be able to keep the agitation of the world away from his doorstep. Another irony here is that Zuckerman says Lonoff is not read much anymore because of his somewhat strict "sense of virtue". The American trilogy is an elegy for this strict sense virtue, and it is Zuckerman – the author of *Carnovsky*, of all people – who laments the loss of it.

In the same conversation, Zuckerman tells Jerry that he lives like a recluse to avoid any social discourse, and that is another trait Zuckerman has not displayed in previous fiction. In *Zuckerman Bound* he is, in fact, a compulsive talker. As Jonathan Brent notes: "From the point when Lonoff remarks about Nathan's 'voice' to the surgical wiring of his jaw [towards the end of *The Anatomy Lesson*], he is all mouth." (Brent 192) Somewhere along the line since *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife*, Zuckerman has learned to shut up. About himself, at least. Or, he only hints at his own story, and does his talking through his narratives.

When the youthful Zuckerman in *The Ghost Writer* reads a definition of the Jewish writer as "a man with autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose", he is inspired to add "'and blood in his penis', and [he] had then recorded the words like a challenge – a flaming Dedalian formula to ignite [his] soul's smithy." (*Bound* 36) In *American Pastoral*, this Jewish writer no longer has any blood in his penis, prostate surgery has rendered him both "impotent and incontinent" (*Pastoral* 28). Again, a stark contrast to the Zuckerman who kept himself with a harem of four women in *The Anatomy Lesson*. But the reader is wrong in assuming that it was the impotence that has turned him into a hermit, he assures us: "I want to make clear that it wasn't impotence that led me into a reclusive existence … I'd already been living and writing for some eighteen months in my two-room cabin … when … I received a … diagnosis of prostate cancer." (*Stain* 36) In other words, the "operation did no more than to enforce with finality a decision I'd come to on my own". (37) It is, however, this finality that has brought Zuckerman into contact with death, and it is his apprehension of death which eventually will lead him obsessively into his quest to understand and immerse himself in the stories of others.

The Genealogy of the Shack

Zuckerman's current residence is not just inspired by Lonoff, but also a place where he spent time as a youngster – Ira Ringold's shack in Zinc Town, N.J.: "[M]y house [is] an upgraded replica of the two-room shack … that was Ira's beloved retreat." (*Communist* 71) But the aging writer is also keenly aware that the shack is neither Ira's nor Lonoff's idea, but that it is an idea with a history. Zuckerman knows that the shack has a "genealogy", and his description of it deserves to be quoted at some length:

> How did the idea of Ira's shack maintain its hold so long? Well, it's the earliest images – of independence and freedom, particularly – that do live obstinately on, despite the blessing and bludgeoning of life's fullness. And the idea of the shack, after all, isn't Ira's. It has a history. It was Rousseau's. It was Thoreau's. The palliative of the primitive hut. The place where you are stripped back to essentials, to which you return – even if it happens not to be where you came from – to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving. The place where you disrobe, molt it all, the uniforms you've worn and the costumes you've gotten into, where you shed your batteredness and your resentment, your appeasement of the world and your defiance of the world, your manipulation of the world and its manhandling of you. The aging man leaves and goes into the woods – Eastern philosophical thought abounds with that motif, Taoist thought, Hindu thought, Chinese thought. The "forest dweller", the last stage on life's way. Think of those Chinese paintings of the old man under the mountain, receding from the agitation of the autobiographical. He has entered vigorously into competition with life; now, becalmed, he enters into competition with death, drawn down into austerity, the final business. (*Communist* 72).

(One is tempted to add Proust to his list of shack-dwellers, even though he retreated to his bedroom and not a shack, for the activity Zuckerman engages in is similar to Proust's nocturnal jottings in his bedroom.)

Ironically, Zuckerman's description of his *Walden*-like life of seclusion is as much of a pastoral dream as the Swede's life in Old Rimrock. "Stripped back to essentials", "decontaminated and absolved of the striving" – a man like Zuckerman should know that this is but an idyllic dream. And at the end of the trilogy he will forsake this life. Thus the actual process of narration is the process through which he realizes that his belief in the possibility of "becalmed" reclusion does not have any basis in reality. (Indeed, the very fact that he allows the world, in the shape of the Swede, Murray/Ira and Coleman, to intrude into his life refutes the basis of his reclusive existence.)

Either we can assume that Zuckerman's hermit-like existence is some sort of a precautionary measure, a way of detaching his story from history before history can bestow a final tragedy upon him. Or maybe it is a place of retreat to nurse his wounds, to recover from a tragedy. We are not told what sort of "agitation of the autobiographical" was the final straw. Murray Ringold probes him on this issue. Why be such a recluse, he asks: "I'm surprised to see you out of the world like this. It's pretty damn monastic, the way you live ... Sorry, but I do have to tell you: you're still a young man by my count, much too young to be up here. What are you warding off? What the hell happened?" (320). Zuckerman remains silent. However, he maintains that his shack symbolizes "independence and freedom" (72), and that too is quite ironic. Because the narratives he constructs from the stories of his protagonists show that "independence and freedom" come only at great expense. It seems as though Zuckerman tries to elude paying the final cost of having independence and freedom through his reclusion. This is a utopian, a pastoral, idea – one that Murray is able to see through: "[B]eware of the utopia of isolation." (317)

Debra Shostak suggests that the hermit-life is a form of penitence Zuckerman has inflicted upon himself because of his many betrayals (a subject I will return to in Chapter 4): "Roth keeps Zuckerman's secrets, leaving the reader to speculate that only as dire a fate as betrayal could have made him flee to his solitary mountain from the strife of the world ... [H]is melancholy current life suggests the austerity of a penitence." (Shostak 256)

Even though he is willing to describe the nature of his reclusiveness at length, Zuckerman does not want us to pay much attention to it. But I do not think he is being entirely truthful when he insists that "my seclusion is not the story here. It is not a story in any way. I came here because I don't want a story any longer. I've had my story." (71) However, no matter what it was that turned him into a hermit, it is clear to him what he should be doing with the time he has got left. As he tells Murray: "You have a choice up on this mountain: either you can lose contact with history, as I sometimes choose to, or mentally you can do what you're doing, by the light of the moon, for hours on end, work to regain possession of it." (*Communist* 262) What Zuckerman does in his shack, by having lost contact with history (i.e. the history that is happening now, as we speak), is trying to regain possession of history (i.e. the time that has gone by). That is the only way he can bring order to the chaos of the past, and

to keep death at bay. The new things he has learned about both the Swede and Ira have upset his view of the past, and he has to bring it back in order.

Chapter 3: Reimagining American Lives

> [M]y notes, ... that ever-enlarging storage plant for my narrative factory, where there is no clear demarcation dividing actual happenings eventually consigned to the imagination from imaginings that are treated as having actually occurred – memory as entwined with fantasy as it is in the brain.
>
> Nathan Zuckerman, *The Counterlife.*

> Si je travaillais, ce ne serait que la nuit.
>
> Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé.*

3.1: Narrative Strategies

The novels of the American trilogy have one essential thing in common: Each novel is an account of how Nathan Zuckerman came to write that novel. Zuckerman very explicitly discusses the process by which the fiction comes into being. However, these metafictional elements of the narratives do not have the effect of removing the illusion of the novel being "real"; we willingly continue to suspend our disbelief. Rather, the novels of the American trilogy are realistic novels about an author writing books, which turn out to be the books we are reading. The effect is similar to the one Proust achieves at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, when Marcel finally finds the way he will be able to write his book. But whereas *À la Recherche du Temps perdu* is an account of how "Marcel becomes a writer"[9], the American trilogy can be said to be an account of how the aging Zuckerman eventually becomes a "serious" writer. As opposed to *Zuckerman Bound*, which is an account of how he *fails* to become a "serious" writer. Philip Roth has said that it is Zuckerman's flair for comedy that ties him down in the first Zuckerman trilogy: "[W]hat's laughable in *Zuckerman Bound* is his insatiable desire to be a serious man taken seriously by all the serious men …" (*Reading* 159) In the American trilogy, having receded from the world, and lost all desire to be taken seriously by any one, he finally emerges at the end of *The Human Stain* with rejuvenated moral energy as a "serious" writer. I will expand upon this argument in 3.4 and 3.5.

[9] This is Gérard Genette's "summary" of *À la Recherche du Temps perdu*. (*Genette* [1980] 30)

The Written and the Unwritten World

In his collection of non-fiction, *Reading Myself and Others*, rather than making a distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, Philip Roth distinguishes between the *written* and the *unwritten* world. Those are the two worlds he as a writer moves between every day, "back and forth, bearing fresh information, detailed instructions, garbled messages, desperate inquiries, naïve expectations, baffling challenges …" (*Reading* xiii) I believe it can be fruitful to apply these terms to Zuckerman's process in the American trilogy – though one naturally has to think of the trilogy as a written world, and the "written" and "unwritten" world as two entities within that world. For Zuckerman, certain aspects of the unwritten world filter into, or are consciously worked into, the written world, by him. The novels convey the process. Or, in Gérard Genette's terms, at the extradiegetic level sits Philip Roth writing of how Zuckerman, at the diegetic level, enlightened, having produced a book, reveals at the metadiegetic level how this book came into existence. And there are of course more metadiegetic levels beneath. (Genette 1980)

This is illustrated by how we are explicitly reading about the creation of the book we are reading. For example, in *The Human Stain*, when Zuckerman encounters Les Farley, the latter feigns excitement over having met the area's literary celebrity, and asks him for the title of one of his books. "*The Human Stain*," replies Zuckerman. "Yeah? Can I get it?" says Farley. "It's not out yet. It's not finished yet," says Zuckerman. (*Stain* 356) And in *American Pastoral,* Zuckerman says to his implied reader that:

> After I'd already written about his brother … I had the amateur's impulse to send Jerry [Levov] a copy of the manuscript to ask what he thought. It was an impulse I quashed … 'That's not my brother,' he'd tell me, 'not in any way. You've misrepresented him. My brother couldn't think like that, didn't talk like that,' etc. (*Pastoral* 74)

Of course Jerry Levov would tell him that "That's not my brother", because Zuckerman is not writing about the Swede. We encounter two Swedes in the book: "Swede-as-reported-by-Zuckerman" and – for more than three fourths of the novel – "Swede-as-imagined-by-Zuckerman". The same goes for Coleman. Ira, however, is only reported, and mostly "reported-by-Murray, then reported-by-Zuckerman".

In a pivotal moment in *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman thinks to himself that: "The truths about us are endless. As are the lies." (*Stain* 315) His useful fictions –

about Swede and Coleman – are not one of the truths about them, but simulations (simulation is the best translation of mimesis, according to Gérard Genette [1988] 15) of one possible truth, or rather a series of possible truths, fitted into a narrative. Zuckerman's written worlds reveal new ways of knowing about the unwritten world, but still, the "Swede" of the written world is wholly independent of the Swede in the unwritten world (Again, I am talking about the supposedly "unwritten" world within a written world). For Roth, and we must presume for Zuckerman as well, literature is "a way of knowing the world as it's not otherwise known. A lot can be known about the world without the help of fiction, but nothing else engenders fiction's kind of knowing because nothing else makes the world *into* fiction." (*Reading* 154-155) This is an echo of Aristotle, who writes in the *Poetics* that "the poet's job is not to report what has happened but what is likely to happen: that is, what is capable of happening according to the rule of probability or necessity." (Aristotle 32). The written and unwritten worlds are two separate worlds, but they are of equal magnitude. As Aristotle maintained, the mimesis-artist is a *creator*, not (as Plato maintained) an imitator separated from the ideal world by several layers of imitation. The phrase "useful fiction" covers the same territory; the knowledge engendered by a fiction can lead to as valuable an insight as any achieved in the "real" world. Zuckerman has to turn the Swede's story into fiction, in order to reach the level of enlightenment that he values the most. Its truth is a fictional truth, a truth that is aware that it is one possibility out of an unlimited number of other possibilities. It is the truth from the point of view of Zuckerman.

Turning Their Stories into Narrative

What spawns the narrative in each novel is an epiphanic moment, a revelation, for Zuckerman; the moment in which he realizes that he has been wrong in his assumptions about his three protagonists' stories. It is not the fact that he has made wrong assumptions that irritates him, that is as inevitable as breathing, but it is that he has let himself get confident in his assumptions, that he has been sure that he had gotten them all figured out. That is the greatest mistake. "The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again." (*Pastoral* 35) Being wrong stirs Zuckerman up; it stirs his imagination

up, gets his narrative factory going and keeps his misreadings of peoples' stories in a state of flux. Roth has said something to the same effect about how he wants his books to be read, or more precisely, misread; that "misreadings … conferred by skillful, cultivated, highly imaginative, widely read misreaders can be instructive… [G]eniuses misread nursery rhymes – all that's required is for the genius to have his own fish to fry." (*Reading* 151) Zuckerman essays a more creative misreading of each of his protagonist – a misreading, or rather, miswriting, that is aware that it does not constitute anything other than a fictional truth – but one ought not forget that Zuckerman has his own fish to fry.

The Swede, Ira and Coleman have their stories, Zuckerman knows their stories, but then he learns something new, something that makes him able to turn their stories into a *narrative*. With the Swede, the epiphany is the realization that he harbored bottomless misery behind his bland, complacent exterior. With Ira, it is the fact that the communist witch hunt even reached Zuckerman by his association with him. With Coleman, it is seeing a black woman at his (Jewish) funeral, and realizing that she is his sister.

Asking for a Book

Interestingly, all three protagonists ask Zuckerman to write a book for them. In other words, he does not start prying into their lives for narrative fodder unencouraged. However, both the Swede and Coleman partly conceal their requests:

The Swede wants help in writing an homage to his father, and contacts Zuckerman out of the blue, through a letter, not having spoken to him in decades except for a chance encounter, to ask for his assistance.

Coleman wants a book about his downfall at the college, a book he himself is writing but is unable to finish. But he does not want Zuckerman – or, indeed, anyone else – to know that he is black. In other words, he does not want to give him the vital ingredient of his life story. Or does he? By getting close to Zuckerman, Coleman puts him on the trail. That is at least what Zuckerman likes to think.

Ira is of course dead, and cannot ask Zuckerman for a book, but his brother can. And although Murray does not request it explicitly, he considers it his last task "to file Ira's story with Nathan Zuckerman" (*Communist* 265), because Zuckerman is the

last one alive who cares about that story, hence he becomes a repository for Murray's memory.

But Zuckerman does not turn out the books they want him to turn out – he does not turn their stories into the kind of narratives they had envisioned, with the possible exception of what Murray Ringold had in mind for Ira's story. Which begs the question; to what extent is it the protagonists and their stories that intrude into the life of Zuckerman, and not the other way around? Is Zuckerman doing them a "favor", or is he a kind of "leech", someone who has exhausted his own life for narratives, and who turns to other people's lives, wanting to "suck" the narratives out of them. There is a discrepancy between how Zuckerman continuously insists on how his hermit-like existence is a retreat from the "agitation of the autobiographical" (*Communist* 72) and his need for other peoples' biographies to feed his narratives. He has removed the "auto" from "biographical", but the agitation is still there. There is something that drives him to strike up a new friendship and turning that new friend into a character, or when running into old acquaintances, to renew the connection with them, turning them into characters. His quest to find out everything about them is maybe not malevolent, but it is not entirely benevolent either.

Generally, one can say that Zuckerman in *American Pastoral* immerses himself in his imagination; in *I Married a Communist*, he sits back and listens; and in *The Human Stain*, it is a mix of the two, though with emphasis on the narrator's imagination. Thus *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* share a narrative basis – that of Zuckerman's (re)imagination – while the middle book, *I Married a Communist*, in a way refutes this method, and I will argue that it does so to the detriment of quality. The emphasis in the following will therefore be on the first and third book of the trilogy.

3.2: *American Pastoral*

"How moving and pathetic these pastorals are that cannot admit contradiction or conflict! ... [N]ot even Jews, who are to history what Eskimos are to snow, seem able ... to protect themselves against the pastoral myth of life before Cain and Abel ..." writes Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* (322). Thus, when a book called *American Pastoral* appears, narrated by Zuckerman, about a man who on the surface appears to be the incarnation of success, one suspects that something is rotten in Arcadia.

The Swede as Reflection of Zuckerman

Zuckerman calls the Swede "this person least like myself". (74) However, I do not think he is being entirely truthful in saying that. The two of them are in fact rather similar in many ways, and as an early draft shows, *American Pastoral* is the story of a Roth, or a Zuckerman, living a sort of counterlife, a life that could have been, where the protagonist chooses to conform to the older generation's expectations (except for his one major transgression, that is; marrying a *shiksa*). Debra Shostak, the first researcher to have access to the papers Philip Roth has deposited at the Library of Congress, writes in her recent Roth study of the first draft of what was to become *American Pastoral*. It is more than a hundred pages long and dated 1972. There are two suggestions in the notes, either that the book is about "Philip Roth" or about a Milton Lebow[10]. This protagonist is a successful businessman, a complacent assimilated American Jew, who has a daughter – Merry – who blows up the faculty club at Princeton University. Possible titles for the book appear in the draft, among them "How the Other Half Lives"[11], "The Good Son", "An American Jewish Family" and "The Story of an Unlived Life". There is a handwritten line at the head of the first chapter which reads: "This [illegible] Roth who I am not but might have been." The draft is narrated by a third-person narrator and at times by Lebow himself. (Shostak 124-125)

Roth has said that in *American Pastoral*,

> this *mediating intelligence* named Nathan Zuckerman solved the problem of how to launch the book. Only when I got Zuckerman in there thinking could I get the story of the Lvovs [sic] going. I'd begun the book some 20 years earlier, near the end of the Vietnam War ... but never knew how to proceed after the daughter blew up a building." ("McGrath Interivew", my italics)

I think "mediating intelligence" is a key phrase here, not just for *American Pastoral*, but for the entire trilogy; all three novels are narrated via the *mediating intelligence* of Zuckerman.

Perhaps, as Timothy Parrish suggests, Zuckerman "cannot quite admit to himself that he and Swede share the same story," because the Swede is his childhood

[10] Milton is Philip Roth's middle name.
[11] This phrase also found its way into *American Pastoral*, voiced by Marcia Umanoff as the reason to why Swede and Dawn would go and see *Deep Throat* at the cinema. (350)

hero, and because as an adult he feels intellectually superior to him. Furthermore, as an artist, "Zuckerman is unfamiliar with thinking about how identity choices might be made for reasons other than aesthetic experimentation". (Parrish [2000] 88) Such other reasons for making identity choices are what he sets out to uncover in *American Pastoral*, and he does so through reimagining the Swede's life.

The Illogic of the Dream

Zuckerman has only got a few facts regarding the Swede to go on. He receives a letter from him, where he is asked to help write a memoir of the Swede's recently deceased father, Lou, to be published privately. Generally regarded a tough and thick-skinned man, the Swede writes of Lou that: "Not everyone knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones." (*Pastoral* 17-18) This phrase really catches Zuckerman's eye, and makes him curious. Suffering? In the life of the Levovs? Impossible. When the two of them meet in an Italian restaurant that, fittingly, has not changed since they were children, Zuckerman is, however, disappointed. He meets a bland, self-satisfied man who makes no allusions to the "shocks that befell his loved ones". But Zuckerman is probably right – or he eventually deems himself to be – in his first impulse: "No, his letter … cannot be the whole story … He wants something recorded. That's why he's turned to me: to record what might otherwise be forgotten. Omitted and forgotten. What could it be?" (30) He soon realizes that he has to imagine the nature of what has been omitted.

The Swede tells him that he has had prostrate surgery, but, contrary to the impotent Zuckerman, he is back in health. "I got off easy, I guess," the Swede says, and Zuckerman thinks that "this big jeroboam of self-contentment really was in possession of all he ever had wanted." (29) However, a short while later, Zuckerman encounters Swede's younger brother Jerry at his 45th high school reunion and learns that the Swede has just *died* from prostrate cancer. He lied to Zuckerman; or rather, he gave him the spin on the Swede that Zuckerman – and indeed everyone – expected. The Swede is not supposed to suffer, so he does not let on that he does. And Jerry tells Zuckerman more: The Swede's daughter was the Rimrock bomber, his first wife was a former Miss New Jersey who demanded the regal treatment that such a title entailed, and his father really was "one impossible bastard" (66). In other words, there was a lot more to the Swede's story than Zuckerman had assumed. As he says, "Never been

more mistaken about anybody in my entire life." (39) When Zuckerman's conversation with Jerry is interrupted, Jerry leaves, and Zuckerman concludes that "anything more I wanted to know, I'd have to make up" (74) – and that is exactly what he proceeds to do: The entire story from page 90 and onwards is the product of Zuckerman's *imagination*. At the reunion he sinks into a nostalgic reverie, to the tones of Johnny Mercer's "Dream" – an appropriately titled hit-song from the 40s (a few lines from its lyrics also serve as one of the novel's two epigraphs). The song works for Zuckerman in the same way that the *madeleine* worked for Marcel in *À la Recherche du Temps perdu*. But it is not his own past that opens itself up to him in a form of remembrance that perhaps has as much to do with forgetting as with recollection – it is the past of the Swede. Zuckerman, while dancing with an old sweetheart, disappears into the Swede's story. "I lifted onto my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America," he says, "I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion. And I dreamed ... I dreamed a realistic chronicle." (89) The very fact that this happens while he is at his high school reunion makes it plausible that his reverie is the dream of a life not lived as much as it is a dream of the Swede; it is as if he imagines himself to be a teenager again, ready to immerse himself in life – could he have made life turn out differently, by making the "right" choices? The answer must be both yes and no, with heavy emphasis on the latter, because tragedy befalls the Swede, even if he does the utmost to prevent it. Even though Zuckerman says he dreams a "realistic chronicle", certain unreal elements of the dream tugs at the folds of the realism; for instance the Swede's late night "conversations" with Angela Davis (157-167), and the strange Rita Cohen, a deus ex machina character who is the key to Merry's destiny, but who Merry claims to have no knowledge of (252-253).

The Swede's story is an answer to the questions Zuckerman poses in a speech he *does not* give at the reunion, the speech he composes *after* the reunion, between three and six a.m., when he tries "to comprehend the union underlying the reunion, the common experience that had joined us as kids." Zuckerman poses questions – "blurry, insomniac shadows of these questions and their answers" – about what happened to the hopes of his generation, and the hopes its elders had for it:

> What is astonishing is that we, who had no idea how anything was going to turn out, now know exactly what happened. That the results are in for the class of January 1950 – the unanswerable questions answered, the

> future revealed – is that not astonishing? To have lived – and in this country, and in our time, and as who we were. Astonishing. (44)

Zuckerman, as a result of the reunion, the news of the Swede's death, and his own brush with death when undergoing prostate cancer surgery with resulting impotence, feels he is "a biography in perpetual motion, memory to the marrow of [his] bones": "Instead of recapturing time past, I'd been captured by it in the present, so that passing seemingly out of the world of time I was, in fact, rocketing through to its secret core" (44-45) At the reunion, he is surrounded by death in general, because so many of the people who should have been there have gone forever.

In fact, Zuckerman has already answered many of the questions he poses in his speech, because in the logic of the story, he writes his speech *after* he has imagined the "realistic chronicle" of Swede, though it appears earlier in the narrative. At the end of the novel, the narrative leaves us stranded in 1974, during the Watergate scandal, while *Deep Throat* is drawing hordes to the movie theaters, but we already know what Zuckerman does when the tones of "Dream" die out, and the reunion comes to an end: He composes a speech with questions he has already answered, opaquely, through the story of Swede; a story that has yet to come in the pages of the novel. Ironically, Zuckerman devours his childhood favorite, six *rugelach* cakes, *after* the reunion, hoping to have a proustian experience like the one Marcel had with the *madeleine*, but "having nothing like Marcel's luck":

> "[P]erhaps I'd find vanishing from Nathan what, according to Proust, vanished from Marcel the instant he recognized 'the savor of the little *madeleine*': the apprehensiveness of death. 'A mere taste,' Proust writes, and 'the word death … [has] … no meaning for him.' So, greedily I ate …" (47)

What we soon will know, however, is that his *madeleine* does not come in the form of a pastry, but in the shape of a song. And that the story of Swede is what appears to him in a vision while dancing to the song, and that it is this vision he will immerse himself in the following months, in order to keep the apprehensiveness of death at bay: "Let's speak further of death and of the desire – understandably in the ageing a desperate desire – to forestall death, to resist it, to resort to whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, anything, *anything* but clarity." (47)

Zuckerman writes down the vision he had, presumably according to the same nocturnal illogic on which the reunion speech was composed: A logic that is not based

on the rational remembrance of "facts", but that has more in common with trying to remember a dream. It is what J. Hillis Miller describes as

> the involuntary memory which [Walter] Benjamin[12] calls forgetting ... [The] kind of memory [that] constructs an imaginary life, "lived life", as dreams make for us strangely affective "memory" of things that never happened as such... This "memory" creates ... a vast intricate network of lies, the memory of a world that never was." (Miller 9)

Zuckerman is thinking similar thoughts to himself at his high school reunion, after just having had a conversation with an old class mate he himself has no recollection whatsoever of ever knowing: "[W]e don't just forget things because they don't matter but also forget things because they matter too much – because each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern whose labyrinthine windings are an identification mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint." (*Pastoral* 55) The strange thing here is, of course, that Zuckerman "remembers" the Swede's life, he creates these forgetful memories out of a few facts he has of the biography of another person. He has to *remember* the Swede's life in order to make sense of the story, and turn it into a narrative. As Walter Benjamin writes: "[A]n experienced event is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; *a remembered event is infinite, because it is ... a key to everything that happened before it and after it*." (Benjamin 204, my italics).

Zuckerman describes his immersion in the Swede as an all consuming activity, one, we must assume, closely linked to the uneventfulness of his hermit-like existence:

> "[I] think about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him, day and night try to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse, make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life ..." (*Pastoral* 74)

Derek Parker-Royal calls this the process of "reimagining", and that term I have borrowed in the heading for this chapter. Parker-Royal maintains that Zuckerman is doing the same thing here as he does in *The Ghost Writer*, where he brings Anne Frank back to life in New England, or in *The Counterlife*, when he is trying out different realities, and giving different characters different roles in each reality:

[12] Miller is here referring to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Image of Proust" in *Illuminations*.

> Roth has his protagonists reimagine their realities and establish a space where they can renegotiate their subjectivity, especially within the perimeters of ethnic identity. By reimagining, I mean that ... Nathan Zuckerman … take[s his life] and create[s] a counter-reality to that which [he is] experiencing. (Parker-Royal [2001] 2)

Parker-Royal thinks that such imaginings suggest a multifaceted sense of self, "freeing up the subject to explore possibilities that are not confined to one fixed notion of what it means to be an American writer, a man, or a Jew." (2) However, I believe the fundamental theme of *American Pastoral* is what Zuckerman realizes through the Swede's story: That even though the self may be of a performative nature, one's ethnic, or rather tribal, identity is not. Even though Zuckerman, in *The Counterlife*, says that "in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through" (*Counterlife* 320), his tribal identity lies at the basis of these impersonations as a constant, even though he is a Jew "without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (324). The Swede, however, tries to escape being "just the object itself" through his immersion in "quaint Americana". (*Pastoral* 68)

The Self and the Tribe

Why does Zuckerman choose to "remember" the Swede's story? For the Swede is the symbol of Zuckerman's generation of young Jews who were to leave their tribal ways behind and share the bounty of America; he wore his Jewishness "so lightly" (20), he was "our Kennedy"[13] (83), he was "our point man into the next immersion, at home here the way the Wasps were at home here" (89). Because the Swede is sort of the *highest* common denominator, the incarnation of what all the Weequahic kids aspire to become: An American who happens to be a Jew (as opposed to a Jewish American). Understanding the fall of the Swede is to Zuckerman not only a tool for making sense of his own fall, but indeed the fall of his entire generation.

The Swede's transgression is that he tries not only to impersonate a Gentile, but to become one, even begetting a Gentile.[14] The starting point of Zuckerman's

[13] This is one of several comparisons made between the Swede and John F. Kennedy in the novel. The Kennedy comparisons in *American Pastoral* have been discussed by Kathleen L. McArthur.
[14] The Swede's role as just another member of his generation who tries to melt into America is described very simply and eloquently in *American Pastoral*: "Swede ... was actually another of our

reverie – the "remembered" event that is the key to everything else – is that the Swede blames the tragedy that befalls his family on a transgression on his part; an illicit kiss on his eleven year old daughter's mouth. It is from this remembered event the Swede tries to draw a line in order to explain everything bad that happens to his family. But Zuckerman's Swede traces his steps back to the wrong transgression; it was begetting the girl in the first place the sowed the seed of disaster, because he was procreating with an Irish Catholic, thereby ignoring hundreds of years of his tribe's history. As Jerry Levov sarcastically says: "She's post-Catholic, he's post-Jewish, together they're going to go out there to Old Rimrock to raise little post-toasties." (73) Merry's self does not have her tribal identity at its basis, and is left in a constant state of performance (which her rapid trying out and jettisoning of "religions" – Catholicism, Audrey Hepburn, leftwing radicalism, Jainism – illustrates). And her tragedy is the unlimited amount of possibilities that leaves her with. Zuckerman asks early on of the Swede, "Where was the Jew in him?" (20) And eventually he finds the answer, that his Jewish identity was something he had jettisoned in favor of belief in the American myth that one can recreate oneself from scratch, but for Merry, that identity was not there to be lost in the first place.

Though the seed of Zuckerman's "tribal stance" may be read out of the closing pages of *The Counterlife* – even though we there encounter a so-called postmodern definition of the self – I think Timothy Parrish is right in suggesting that, with *American Pastoral*, "Roth rewrites Zuckerman's story as a way of rewriting all of his previous Zuckerman stories" (Parrish [2000] 86), or at least he casts the previous Zuckerman stories in a different light, giving their comedy a distinctly darker flavor.

Who Jettisons Whom?

After page 90, Roth has said that he jettisons Zuckerman, and the initial critical response to *American Pastoral* was to ignore Zuckerman's presence, regard him as some kind of self-indulgent structural flaw, and only focus on the novel's protagonist, the Swede.[15] But even though Zuckerman does not reappear at the end, restoring some

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neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns." (20) Through this alliterative use of names, Roth shows how each successive generation moves itself further and further away from the tribe.

[15] I am thinking of the reviews by e.g. Todd Gitlin, Robert Boyers, Elizabeth Hardwick or Louis Menand.

sort of fictional normalcy, it does not mean that Zuckerman is jettisoned. It is rather the Swede that is jettisoned. Or, Swede Levov never appears in this book at all, everything we know about him is filtered, mediated, through Zuckerman. As Debra Shostak puts it: "In some sense, it is not Nathan Zuckerman who disappears into the Swede's story but the Swede who disappears into Nathan's. If the Swede, as Zuckerman observes, is nowhere to be seen, Zuckerman is everywhere." (Shostak 247) Sometimes, Zuckerman is the third person observer who has direct access to the Swede's brain. Other times, when essaying to move closer to nucleus of Swede's self, he illustrates this formally by moving into the first person (e.g. *Pastoral* 210-213) And at times, though it is by no means clear, we can assume that Zuckerman – or perhaps even Zuckerman's author – withdraws from the Swede and lets his own voice be heard.

The most interesting achrony of this sort is a movement from a description of how the in-laws – the Dwyers and the Levovs – feel about each other, to a general description of the philosophy at the basis of Thanksgiving. It starts thus: "And it was never but once a year that they were brought together anyway, and that was on the neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving …" And then the sentence moves into achronic territory, with perhaps the most telling description of what the book is about (and at this point, we are but twenty pages from the end):

> … when everybody gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff – no kugel, no gelfite fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal turkey for two hundred and fifty million people – one colossal turkey feeds all. A moratorium on funny foods and funny ways and religious exclusivity, a moratorium on the three-thousand-year-old nostalgia of the Jews, a moratorium on Christ and the cross and the crucifixion for the Christians, when everyone in New Jersey and elsewhere can be more passive about their irrationalities than they are the rest of the year … It is the American pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours. (402)

Zuckerman knows that this armistice is both brief and transitory – his version of Swede Levov encounters tragedy because he believed it could be permanent.

3.3: *I Married a Communist*

The frame of the narrative in *I Married a Communist* is a six night conversation Zuckerman has with his old high school English teacher, Murray Ringold. Very little effort is made at explaining how Zuckerman and Murray end up at their verbal

marathon. Zuckerman simply tells us very matter-of-factly that Murray was in town enrolled as a student at Athena College, at a summer program entitled "Shakespeare at the Millennium". "That's how I'd run into him on the Sunday he arrived – having failed to recognize him, I was fortunate that he recognized me – and how we came to spend our six evenings together. That's how the past turned up this time, in the shape of a very old man …" (*Communist* 3) That the past inevitably turns up is a matter of fact: Even being a hermit cannot keep it away. Murray says as much himself, when he quotes Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." (*Communist* 302)

Zuckerman the Listener

At one point in *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman steps away from his conversations with Murray and his recollections of Ira and his younger self, and he moves to a more general perspective on how he became who he is. He says:

> I think of my life as one long speech that I've been listening to … the book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: "Listening."
> Can that have been the unseen drama? Was all the rest a masquerade disguising the real no good that I was obstinately up to? … [W]as I from the beginning, by inclination as much as by choice, merely an ear in search of a word. (222)

"The real no good" he was up to, while listening to all the people he had known – all of them for some reason wanting him to "hear them and their arias" (222) – was finding out how he could use their voices for fiction, learning how their voices sound.

This is the central philosophy behind the narrative of *I Married a Communist*. On the diegetic level, Zuckerman listens to Murray Ringold narrate the story of Ira; on the metadiegetic level, Zuckerman narrates how he listened to a series of role models, and jettisoned each in turn in order to arrive at his aesthetic position. The listening Zuckerman does here is literal, it is unlike the listening he will do in *The Human Stain*, which is of a more mystical sort, listening to voices from beyond the grave. Here he actually listens to another person talking. He listens, and then he transmits. The question is – how much editorial work does he do in the process? That is an open-ended question, but we are given the impression that very little editing is done, given the sheer amount – pages upon pages – of quotations from Murray's speech. Thus, more than being a dialogue, this is Murray's monologue as transmitted – or mediated –

by Zuckerman. Every time Zuckerman enters into the conversation, it is to pose a question of two, so as to spur Murray's monologue further on.

The amount of information and detail Murray has on the life of Ira and those close to him is astounding – for we are not given the impression that Murray embellishes or "fictionalizes". No, he is trying to report what he knows to be "facts" – how the world looked to Ira, and how he perceived his antagonists – to the embellisher, Zuckerman. Here, as opposed to in both *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, where significant parts of the plots are "imagined" by Zuckerman, nothing is imagined. All is reported, from what Murray has said. Paradoxically, this narrative strategy leaves Ira at a greater distance from us than the Swede or Coleman. We never get into his head, because Zuckerman the narrator never imagines himself to be in there. Ira is always seen from the outside, and we never truly learn what triggers his anger, other than the fact that he had a nasty father and no mother. We get much closer to Murray, in fact. As opposed to in the two other novels, where the entire point of the narrative is that no one knows the truth about anyone, and that Zuckerman's narrative is just one opportunity out of an endless amount, here Zuckerman never questions Murray's truth. The version of Ira that is presented to him he accepts, unquestioningly.

Here and there, however, Zuckerman intersperses his own recollection of his youth with Murray's stream of consciousness, but that is not part of the conversation; those recollections are for the reader's eyes, the way Zuckerman the author structures his material after the conversations. And in the context of this thesis, they are perhaps the most important sections of the novel. These recollections turn *I Married a Communist* into a sort of prequel to the *Bildungsroman* that is *The Ghost Writer*, in that they tell us how the (very) young Zuckerman arrived at the aesthetic position that enabled him to write his first fiction of value. But he arrives at this position through listening as well, to his series of fathers. Until he has jettisoned his last father, readying himself for the "orphanhood that is total, which is manhood". (217) Then he seizes being merely an ear, and becomes a voice too. But again, as an old man here, he lets the ear be most important. Thus, the Zuckerman – both the young and old – we encounter here is the same that Timothy Parrish meant he found in *American Pastoral*: "[I]t is as if Zuckerman is transformed into an earlier version of himself – the one that

existed before he discovered the burden – and joy – of subjectivity." (Parrish [2000] 86)

Death in Different Guises

Though they have been brought together by coincidence, Murray is keenly aware that he is running out of time. Death, or rather Murray's awareness of its imminence, is an important part of the equation of storytelling here. For Murray, telling Ira's story is a race against time: He is ninety years old, and there is only one living person left who cares about what he has to say, and who has "access" to the written world, and that is the man with whom he has had a chance encounter, the man upon whose porch he is sitting for six consecutive summer nights. Zuckerman, worrying about the frail old man, says: "[M]aybe you should get some sleep … You're not getting tired? Cold?"…. And Murray says: "I've never had a chance to tell this story to anyone this way, at such length. I've never told it before and I won't again. I'd like to tell it right. To the end." "Why?" replies Zuckerman. And Murray says: "I'm the only person still living who knows Ira's story, you're the only person still living who cares about it. That's why: because everyone else is dead." (*Communist* 263-265) This of course echoes Zuckerman's thoughts on the Swede's letter in *American Pastoral*, and his assumption that the Swede wants him to "record what might otherwise be forgotten" (*Pastoral* 30)

Though Murray wants to get it right to the very end, there may also be some reluctance on his part in sharing the grittiest part of Ira's story. For if we are to believe Zuckerman's account of their conversations, Murray withholds the most crucial information until the final moments of the final conversation: When Ira was young he killed a man, and enjoyed it too. The anti-Semitic mobster Strollo attacked Ira, and Ira turned self-defense into an opportunity to murder someone. Then he went covered in blood and cackling to see his brother, saying "Strollo just took his last strollo." (*Communist* 294-300) There is no surprise in this, however; the fact has been proleptically alluded to already (213). And even early on, in Nathan's recollections, we see that Ira's stature and loudness are symptoms of a more sinister malaise, when he takes young Nathan with him to see an old army "buddy", and said buddy promptly pulls a gun on them, saying "Get out of my house, you dumb Communist prick":

> "You're a wild man, Ira. I'm not going to wait for you to do to me what you did to Butts … [Kid] Asslick, didn't the Iron Man ever tell you about Butts? … He tried to kill Butts. He tried to drown Butts … [D]idn't you tell the kid, Ira, about … the rages and tantrums in Iran …Didn't you tell him about Garwych, either? About Solak? About Becker? … Get up and get out, you crazy fucking homicidal nut." (97-98)

Zuckerman as Repetition of Ira

The narrative of Ira's life after the cataclysmic death of Strollo becomes one of self-civilization. After committing murder, he hits the rails and then joins the army. There he encounters his educator, (the self-taught) Johnny O'Day, and is given a reading list heavy on Marxist-Leninist pamphlets and political literature (as opposed to his brother, who becomes a literate man, and English teacher and a connoisseur of Shakespeare). When Ira gets out of the army, having discovered reading and his – albeit limited – acting ability, he wants to leave the brute behind. That is why he wants to marry Eve, and have a child. He wants, according to Murray, "people around him whom he couldn't explode in front of." Through his marriage with Eve, Ira can become a new man. As Murray puts it,

> He has pulled off a great big act of control over the story that was his life. He is all at once awash in the narcissistic illusion that he has been sprung from the realities of pain and loss, that his life is *not* futility – that it's anything *but*. No longer walking in the valley of the shadow of his limitations. No longer the excluded giant consigned to be the strange one forever. Barges in with that brash courage – and there he is. Out of the grips of obscurity. And proud of his transformation. The exhilaration of it. The naïve dream – he's in it! The new Ira, the worldly Ira. A big guy with a big life. Watch out. (60)

"The naïve dream – he's in it!" That is a sentence that pertains to all three of Zuckerman's protagonists. And for a short while, Ira's project seems realizable – Eve becomes pregnant. But she is pressured by Sylphid into having an abortion, and upon hearing the devastating news, Ira seeks solace at his brother's in Newark. There he meets Nathan, the young literature prodigy, for the very first time. "[H]e meets you," says Murray:

> He meets this boy who was all that he had never been and who had all that he had never had … He was the Newark boy with the bad eyes and the cruel household and no education. You were the nurtured Newark boy given everything. You were Johnny O'Day Ringold [the name Ira intended for his unborn son] – that's what you were all about. That was your job, whether you knew it or not. To help him shield himself against his nature, against all the force in that big body, all the murderous rage. (297)

Zuckerman is all Ira ever wanted to be, he is Ira's ideal, what Ira thinks he could have become, giving more benign circumstances in life. And like Ira, Zuckerman also has rage, but he has channeled it into his fiction. However, Ira naturally fails in his project of civilizing himself. When Eve dies, he turns back into the young man who murdered Strollo the mobster, and even repeats to his brother the delirious joke of yore upon hearing the news: "Strollo just took his last strollo." (313) And the young Zuckerman quickly grows bored with Ira's ranting, and leaves his hero behind. Thus, as was inevitable, he fails to do the "job" he had been assigned. And we must suppose that he never looked back, because at the very outset of the narrative he tells us that he had very little idea of what kind of fate befell Ira and Murray after he himself left Newark for college. In other words, in his shedding – or betrayal – of Ira, Zuckerman, though unwittingly, contributes to the failure of Ira's civilizing project.

Murray also holds back to the very end another vital piece of information: The failure of his own moral stance, and how it results in the death of his wife Doris, when she is brutally mugged in the streets of Newark. This – as opposed to the fact that Ira was a murderer – shocks Zuckerman. And he realizes that Murray's story by and large has gone untold, and that it is now too late to hear it, to his regret: "We could have sat on my deck for six hundred nights before I heard the entire story of how Murray Ringold, who'd chosen to be nothing more extraordinary than a high school teacher, had failed to elude the turmoil of his time and place and ended up no less a historical casualty than his brother." (318)

In the end, they are all doomed to lose, both the principled man (Murray), the man who violates the most basic principle (Ira), and the one who is loyal to nothing but his art (Zuckerman). For given all the better circumstances Zuckerman has had in life, Zuckerman has also failed; at least in Murray eyes, his renunciation of the world is no victory. The whirligig of time brings in his revenges no matter what is done to prevent it.

Though *I Married a Communist* may be an inferior novel compared to the other two, it is, as Mark Shechner has observed, one of Roth's most quotable novels, "on the subjects of lying, betrayal, revenge, recrimination …" (Shechner 181) As such, it is a source, mostly through the sage-like character of Murray, for comment on the themes of the two other books of the trilogy. And as such a source it will be used in Chapter 4.

3.4: *The Human Stain*

"[S]tanding in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman's coffin, I was completely seized by his story, by its end and its beginning, and, then and there, I began this book." (*Stain* 337) That is the situation Nathan Zuckerman describes himself in towards the end of *The Human Stain*. He has just had a startling realization: the black woman he noticed at the funeral, the one who also lingered after the ceremony was over, turned out not to be the wife of the only black man present. No, she is Ernestine Silk, Coleman's sister. The fact that she is black naturally turns Coleman's – the supposed Jew – story on its head, and makes it clear to Zuckerman that so many of his – and indeed everyone's – assumptions about Coleman had been entirely wrong. How could they call him a racist in the spooks incident? And why could he not simply tell the truth and set the record straight?

Zuckerman's revelation is placed in the closing section of the novel. And it is not until one quarter into the novel that the reader learns that Coleman is black, as Zuckerman envisions his youth. This allows the reader to have a similar experience: the opportunity to make some fallacious assumptions about the protagonist first. (Though already on page 15 we are given a very frank hint about the true nature of Coleman's ethnicity: We are told that he is "the small-nosed Jewish type with the facial heft in the jaw, one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white." [15-16])

Competing with Death (Again)

Zuckerman discovers Coleman's secret. But there is a reason that he is the one who does so – he has namely been on the lookout for a secret to uncover, both with regards to Coleman and Faunia. The writer has *decided* that Coleman has a secret.

> How do I reach this conclusion? Why a secret? Because it is there when he's with her. And when he's not with her it's there too – it's the secret that's his magnetism. It's something *not* there that beguiles, and it's what's been drawing me along, the enigmatic *it* that he holds apart as his and no one else's … There is a blank. That's all I can say. They are, together, a *pair* of blanks. (213)

And when the two of them die, these blanks can only be filled in by the imaginative efforts of the writer.

Zuckerman's revelation makes him realize that the narrative of Coleman's life is archetypically American – he had willed into existence a new life completely separated from his old life, at tremendous cost he had "bifurcated". Zuckerman thinks: "To become a new being. To bifurcate. The drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving – and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands." (342) Thus, Zuckerman's desire to plunge into Coleman's story is synonymous with his desire to plunge into America's story.

Fittingly, Zuckerman's narrative machine gets going in a graveyard, next to a freshly closed grave. Whereas the plunge into narrative was a way of avoiding being apprehensive about death in *American Pastoral*, here it becomes more of a confrontation:

> Out there at [Coleman's] grave ... I waited and waited for him to speak until at last I heard him ... Then I ... picked up the sassy vibrations of that straight talk that was [Faunia's]. And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death." (338)

Resurrecting the silenced voices of the unwritten world by bringing them into the written world is what Zuckerman does. He cannot leave the blank unfilled, and must do something to fill it in before he too is overtaken by the inertia of death.

This mystical listening that Zuckerman engages in in the graveyard is the origin of the narrative. Here, in Mark Maslan's words, "the memory of all [Coleman] did and underwent transmigrates, in the form of *disembodied dialogue*, to Zuckerman". (Maslan 383, my italics) The narrative Zuckerman turns out – the book we are reading – is based on a few facts, as he has gotten them from Ernestine, concerning Coleman's past. But the origin and centerpiece of the narrative, the point he comes up with in the graveyard all by himself, is that Coleman revealed his secret, that he was a black man passing as white, to Faunia; that this revelation was the basis of their union. Zuckerman at least needs to make this assumption to make sense of his narrative, to fill in the blanks, and he says as much to Coleman, in their "disembodied dialogue": "'I admit that may not be at all correct,' I said to my utterly transformed friend, 'I admit that none of it may be. But here goes anyway: when you were trying to find out if she'd been a hooker … when you were trying to uncover *her* secret …'" (*Stain* 338) Zuckerman's calls Coleman his "utterly transformed friend". Transformed in Zuckerman's eyes by the revelation, and now, in this disembodied dialogue, he is in the

process of being transformed *by* Zuckerman, by Zuckerman's (re)imagination: "I can't know," Zuckerman says. "For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do." (213) The faculty of imagination is the one by which Zuckerman can, with Mark Maslan's words, "envision a form of memory that is independent of one's own individual past, a form that is somehow no less one's memory for having originated outside oneself." (Maslan 385) This of course recalls what Derek Parker-Royal has written on the subject of reimagination in *American Pastoral*, discussed above. It seems to be quite difficult to describe the narrative origin in these novels without turning to fittingly vague terms, and I am unable to myself. But what Zuckerman continuously says is that there is not one fixed truth about anyone. Therefore his "memories" of other peoples' lives are not less valid for being made up by him, for these memories do not aspire to be any kind of Truth with a capital T. Or, quoting Aristotle again, Zuckerman's "memories" constitute "what is capable of happening according to the rule of probability or necessity". (Aristotle 32)

A Beginning, a Middle, and an End of Sufficient Magnitude

The Human Stain is saturated with references to ancient Greece and Greek myth: For instance the fact that Coleman is a Classics professor; the explicit comparison between him and Achilles made by Zuckerman; the choir-like role of the college staffers whose conversation Coleman overhears; and the names of certain characters (Faunia – nature woman, like a faun; Delphine – in spite of her name, she is no oracle).[16] For the purpose of this thesis, however, what is most interesting are the references made to Greek poetics, and how these references correspond to the view Zuckerman has of the story of Coleman's life. At Coleman's funeral, Zuckerman is observing the distraught Mark Silk, thinking to himself that Coleman's youngest son no longer had anyone to hate, and that his selfish filial anger had prevented him from ever making amends with his father while he still had a chance. Thinks Zuckerman:

> He had thought Coleman was going to stay here till the whole play could be performed, as though he and Coleman had been set down not in life but on the southern hillside of the Athenian acropolis, in an outdoor theater sacred to Dionysus, where, before the eyes of ten thousand spectators, the

[16] For a more thorough treatment of the Greek allusions in the novel, see Safer, Savin and Shostak.

> dramatic unities were once rigorously observed and the great cathartic cycle was enacted annually. The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end – and an end appropriate in magnitude to that beginning and middle – is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays Coleman taught ... But outside of the classical tragedy ... the expectation of completion, let alone of a just and perfect consummation, is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold. (314-315)

However, this is of course the foolish illusion that most people hold on to – for instance Coleman's moronic students who want "closure" to any given situation that causes even the most miniscule amount of emotional stress. But while Zuckerman lets a somewhat satirical eye describe Mark Silk, he seems to forget that probably no one requires this type of dramatic unity to life as avidly as the writer – Zuckerman himself. And it is *Zuckerman* who gives Coleman completion and a perhaps not just and perfect but fitting consummation of sufficient magnitude. By imagining that Coleman let Faunia in on his secret, Zuckerman – in his own mind – lets Faunia fulfill the role that Steena could not fulfill almost fifty years earlier, that of being Briseïs to Coleman's Achilles. In this way, Coleman's death does not need to be pointless and in no way reflecting the magnitude of his life. The fact that he died side by side with his "partner in crime" is a fitting consummation. But it is *Zuckerman's* desire for an ending of sufficient magnitude that is met. This, for him, can also explain things – for instance the fact that he saw them together in public, as a couple, at the concert at Tanglewood (205-213), becomes a sign: A sign that they know they are heading headlong into the abyss; that they have accepted their banishment, not for breaching the code of conduct in a sanctimonious college community, but as a payment for their crimes; Faunia for allowing her children to die, Coleman for "murdering" his mother and for depriving his children of their roots. And Zuckerman starts to find coherence anywhere and everywhere, but he is aware that he himself wills this coherence into existence: "This is what happens when you write books. There's not just something that drives you to find out everything – something begins putting everything in your path. There is suddenly no such thing as a back road that doesn't lead headlong into your obsession." (344) This imposition of narrative from Zuckerman gives Coleman an end of sufficient magnitude in relation to the beginning and the middle, and a magnitude that goes beyond the farcical funeral. However, there is nothing cathartic about his death as such, for as Timothy Parrish suggests, to Zuckerman, "Coleman is an epic, not a tragic, hero, and his death at the hands of another rage-driven cuckold suits his sense

of literary form." However, having shared his secret, "Coleman dies as one who owns rather than denies his history." (Parrish [2004] 454-455)

Confiding in the Writer

Coleman does of course try to write a book of his own – his account of the spooks incident, entitled *Spooks*, but he is unable to finish it, and that is why he comes rapping on Zuckerman's door in the first place. Up to that point, they have been nothing but passing acquaintances – but after the death of his wife, Coleman is fuelled by grief and insanity, and Zuckerman paraphrases his request thus: He is "speaking loudly and in a rush … I had to write something for him … If he wrote the story in all of its absurdity .. nobody would believe it … But if *I* wrote it, if a professional writer wrote it …" (*Stain* 11)

The immediate consequence of this incident is not that Zuckerman writes a book, but that Coleman and Zuckerman strike up a friendship, both physically (the dance scene, 24-26) and emotionally, and Coleman confides to Zuckerman that he is having an affair with a woman half his age. This revelation is also something that stirs Zuckerman up. He is racked by insomnia after Coleman has told him about his Viagra-fuelled passion with Faunia, and he realizes how much he misses life, he is "hypnotized by the other couple and comparing them to my own washed-out state". (37) His solution is to live by proxy, by annexing their lives as food for his thought.

But letting people get close to him is something Coleman, who possesses a secret of enormous magnitude, has to be careful with. And Zuckerman, after he has had his revelation, imagines Coleman berating himself for allowing a *novelist* to get close to him and his secret:

> Confiding in him. Reminiscing with him. Letting him listen. Sharpening the writer's sense of reality. Feeding that great opportunistic maw, a novelist's mind. Whatever catastrophe turns up, he transforms into writing. Catastrophe is cannon fodder for him. But what can *I* transform this into? I am stuck with it. As is. Sans language, shape, structure, meaning – sans the unities, the catharsis, sans everything. (170)

The unity is something Zuckerman in the end imposes, something he imagines that Coleman wanted. And the secret is naturally the reason that his own written account of his life ended up "sans everything". Zuckerman "says" to the deceased Coleman: "Of course you could not write the book. You'd written the book – the book was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you it would

never work. Your book was your life …" (345) But by getting close to Zuckerman, Coleman, intentionally or not, lets his life be turned into art written down on the page, meeting the desire for a beginning, middle and ending. Either Zuckerman's book is a betrayal of Coleman – or it is the consummation of his life. The question is who Zuckerman is writing it for? The last section of the novel, concerning the funerals of Faunia and Coleman, is called "The Purifying Ritual", and Debra Shostak has argued that the only one that remains to be purified, is Zuckerman himself: "If on the level of the plot, the funerals, the recognition scene when Coleman's secret is revealed, and Nathan's confrontation with Les all serve a ritually cleansing purpose, it is also the case that the novel itself, the telling of it, is the ritual." (Shostak 265)

However, Zuckerman does not construct his narrative of Coleman just for himself. He does it to counter all the other narratives of Coleman constructed by other people. Not just the rumors that instantly became truth when Coleman was alive, but also both the rumors surrounding his death and the "official" version of his life authored by his elder sons. No one wants to hear anything about a murder; no, Coleman accidentally drove off the road – presumably while Faunia was performing some unspeakable sexual act on him. The rumor surge is let loose on the Athena faculty discussion list on the web prior to Coleman's funeral, headed by a posting by "clytemnestra@houseofatreus.com" describing in detail how Coleman abused poor illiterate Faunia Farley. Thinks Zuckerman: "Simply to make an accusation is to prove it. To hear the allegation is to believe it … An epidemic had broken out in Athena … The pathogens were out there … In the universal hard drive, everlasting and undeletable." (290-291) And at the funeral, Herb Keble – the college's first black staffer, hired by Dean Silk, now with his arm twisted by the elder Silk brothers – declares Coleman to have been "an American individualist par excellence [who] was … so savagely traduced by friends and neighbors that he lived estranged from them until his death, robbed of his moral authority by their moral stupidity." (311)

"Everyone was writing *Spooks* now – everybody, as yet, except me," (291) concludes Zuckerman. And when he speaks to Coleman's daughter Lisa at the funeral, and she asks him how all of this – the monumental fall from grace etcetera – could have happened, he has no answer. For how could he answer it – "other than by beginning to write this book?" (304)

3.5: The True Nature of the American Pastoral

Mark Maslan argues that it is through the faculty of imagination that Zuckerman in *The Human Stain* can connect with America's story, the essence of which is deemed in the novel to "the high drama that is upping and leaving" (342); in other words renouncing one's past, especially that of one's tribe, as embodied by the family. But for Maslan there is a problem with this notion. For "why should the renunciation of one's past not extend to the repudiation of one's nationality?" (Maslan 387) He argues that there is a logical flaw behind the premise of the novel's narrative origin (in the cemetery), namely that the only thing that unites the characters in an American experience *is* their pasts, and hence that "upping and leaving", i.e. renouncing the past, though deemed to be quintessentially American by Roth, is not enough to connect Coleman (and Zuckerman) with America. Because in order for them to be American in the first place, they need a bond *prior* to that of "upping and leaving" and that cannot *be* "upping and leaving".

However, I do not see the problem, because the myth of "upping and leaving" is perhaps the quintessential American myth. It is closely linked to the myth of the West, a powerful symbolic presence in America since the seventeenth century. Coleman's myth of "upping and leaving" is, if not analogous, then as American as the symbolic presence of the West was in the mind of every settler in the nineteenth century who traversed beyond the Mississippi in search of virgin land.[17] It really does not matter if Coleman is conscious of it or not, or whether he feels himself to be American in any way before "upping and leaving". Acting analogously with a myth does not have to be logical. Zuckerman's use of Coleman's story as a useful fiction is not in the purpose of investigating the validity of the myth, but rather the consequences of acting in accordance with it.

The consequence of "upping and leaving", renouncing the past, naturally must imply the hope of finding a destination untouched by the past, which is supposed to be simultaneously new *and* prelapsarian, that is, *prior* to the past. And such a destination is of course what the American pastoral is held to be in the trilogy. However, at the end of *The Human Stain*, we, along with Zuckerman, learn the true nature of the

American pastoral: It does not exist, and it never will. There has never been and never will be any such place as Arcadia – not even Newark in the 30s and 40s was such a place, and neither can Zuckerman's mountain retreat be. When Zuckerman, driving on a desolate country road, on his way to Sunday dinner with the Silk family in East Orange, sees the truck of Les Farley, the murderer, parked on the side of the road, he feels compelled to stop his own car and go and find Farley. He starts walking into the wilderness: "Having walked some five hundred yards from the road, I'd intruded upon, no trespassed upon ... a setting as pristine ... as serenely unspoiled, as envelops any inland body of water in New England. It gave you an idea of what the world was like before the advent of man." (345). This is the American pastoral. But the Garden of Eden seized being Eden with the advent of Adam and Eve. And of course Zuckerman does not stumble upon an unspoiled landscape. Out on the frozen lake, he stumbles upon a murderer. And they engage in a dialogue in which the menace is present at all times, each aware that the other knows more than he lets on: Farley knows that Zuckerman knows he is a killer, and Zuckerman knows that Farley knows he is an author looking for clues for a new book. The advent of man into the pristine setting of the pastoral is the harbinger of menace, of chaos. The very notion of the pastoral is irrevocably marked by the human stain:

> the icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X if an illiterate's signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture. Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an Arcadian mountain in America. (361)

The consequence of this meeting is that Zuckerman realizes that he has to relinquish *his* pastoral, his utopia of solitude, his two room shack: "I knew that if and when I finished the book, I was going to have to go elsewhere to live." (360)

Hence at the end of some 1,200 pages, Zuckerman is ready to re-engage with the world. Through his narratives of the Swede, Ira and Coleman, he has learned that it

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[17] These remarks on the West as mythological presence in America are largely derived from Henry

is impossible to seal one's existence off from all that is unsavory. He has learned that paradise is irretrievably lost, that life inevitably takes place after the Fall.

Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land*.

Chapter 4: The Anatomy of the Fall

> Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.
>
> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

> [T]he fact remains that in our family the collective memory doesn't go back to the golden calf and the burning bush, but to "Duffy's Tavern" and "Can You Top This?" Maybe the Jews begin with Judea, but Henry [Zuckerman] doesn't and he never will. He begins with WJZ and WOR, with double features at the Roosevelt on Saturday afternoons and Sunday doubleheaders at Ruppert Stadium watching the Newark Bears. Not nearly as epical, but there you are.
>
> Nathan Zuckerman, *The Counterlife*.

> You must change your life.
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo".

American Pastoral is divided into three sections: "Paradise Remembered", "The Fall" and "Paradise Lost". The first section consists of Zuckerman's recollections of the Newark of his childhood and youth, thereby linking his sense of "paradise" – or the nearest thing to it he can imagine – to a specific time and place. "The Fall" is more complex and abstract, and the entire trilogy can be seen as Zuckerman's attempt, from the point of view and point in time of "Paradise Lost", through his fictions, to make sense of this Fall with a capital F.

The previous chapter dealt mostly with the relationship between Zuckerman and his protagonists, and the act of imagination that spurs the narration in each novel. However, there are of course several more characters in the trilogy. For the melancholy Zuckerman, his three useful fictions are an exploration of certain problems closely linked to American postwar history; on the personal level, to the decline and fall of the city of Newark; on a more philosophical level, to how the myth of America corresponds to what it means to be human. Zuckerman is sort of an explorer of these problems by proxy, he places these problems in the lives of his protagonists, and sees what ripples they cause in the narratives of their lives, and in the lives of the people

(characters) surrounding them. Hence the meta-fictional level in the trilogy, why we never are left in doubt that Zuckerman is the author as well as the narrator. Thus, when certain scenes between Coleman and Faunia, for instance, are played out, Zuckerman is there, both as a mute witness and puppet-master. "Faunia" and "Delphine" and "Merry" are all constructs of Zuckerman's as much as Coleman and Swede are. So when I seemingly remove myself from Zuckerman in the discussion of some of the themes here, I would argue that I do not. For all that is said by the other characters here are either (mostly) imagined by Zuckerman, or reported by – and hence filtered through – him.

4.1: The Human Stain

There is one concept that underlies all three novels, a view of the most fundamental aspect of the human condition. It can be summarized thus: any philosophy of life that does not acknowledge the inevitability of the filthier sides of existence is doomed to fail.

This concept is what gives the closing part of the trilogy its title, *The Human Stain*. Zuckerman imagines a scene in which Faunia escapes from Coleman after for the first time having spent the entire night with him, thereby providing their relationship with a deeper level of significance than it had previously had. She goes to visit a tame crow at a wildlife reserve, and there, while thinking that this crow has alienated himself from other crows by hanging around with humans too much, having become permanently stained by humanity, Zuckerman lets her define the concept of the human stain:

> "The human stain," she said ... *That's how it is* ... we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen – there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity? (*Stain* 242)

Rather than indulge in the fantasy of purification, Faunia reckons that we should be "[r]econciled to the horrible, elemental imperfection". Then Zuckerman the narrator

stops voicing her thoughts, and looks at her from the outside, thinking that "[s]he's like the Greeks, like Coleman's Greeks. Like they're gods. They're petty. They quarrel. They fight. They hate. They murder. They fuck." Whereas the Hebrew God is "infinitely alone, infinitely obscure, monomaniacally the only god there is, was, and always will be, with nothing better to do than worry about Jews", and Jesus is "the perfectly desexualized Christian man-god" with "his uncontaminated mother and all the guilt and shame that an exquisite earthliness inspires", Zeus is a "god of life if ever there was one. God in the image of man." (242-243)

In this rapid comparison of three different religions, Zuckerman concludes that the ancient Greek gods are preferable because of their proximity to humanity. And he says Faunia is *like* them; Faunia, the illiterate outcast at the bottom of society, cast out by the adherents of the two other religions, with their ideals of cleanliness. Faunia's illiteracy, though feigned, is another aspect of her alignment with the Greeks. By pretending to be illiterate, she renounces the entire western written culture, which is in large part based on the Judeo-Christian holy texts.

The human stain is not the same as transgression, it is the innate human trait that makes transgression inevitable. (And the primary form of transgression is betrayal, see below). It is a concept similar to the concept of original sin, but to Faunia, and to Zuckerman, there is nothing sinful about this most basic human quality. By calling this concept the human *stain*, Zuckerman also implies that the gut human reaction is to try to eradicate it. The American trilogy is littered with characters who want the stain washed away from life, and preferably from others' lives as well. In Brett Ashley Kaplan's phrase, the human stain is "the indelible mark that goes beyond the fictions of the self", (Kaplan 135) and one could add, beyond the fictions society has about itself, and also about its history. Society as it is encountered in the trilogy has a great many fictions about itself, and most people would like to keep it that way. The urge for purification is the spur of all delusions in the American trilogy, both on a public level – McCarthyism, 60s radicalism, the 1998 impeachment of the President – and on a private level. What spurs the characters to purify is what spawns their betrayals. The mistake Zuckerman's protagonists make is to identify the human stain in their lives as the tribe to which they belong. In other words, they believe that by severing themselves from the inhibitions and limitations placed on them by the tribe, they are eradicating imperfection from their life, and laying life open to perfection. What they do is buying

into an American myth which, sadly, is false. However, it is an American myth which is infinitely preferable to the one Zuckerman sees is prevalent around him at the time of narration in the last novel, when the neoconservatives have the President where they want him.

One of the things that the young Zuckerman picks up from his teacher Leo Glucksman is that to be a successful artist, you have to be prepared to let your art embrace the totality of existence in all its foulness. Glucksman tells Zuckerman that his "task remains to impart the nuance, to elucidate the complication, to imply the contradiction … to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being." (*Communist* 223) What the aging Zuckerman has realized, through his useful fictions, is that this is not just a recipe for making valuable art, but for enduring life itself. One is reminded of Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, as it is voiced in *The Gay Science*: To embrace life with the human stain is the same as having the ability to answer in the affirmative when confronted with Nietzsche's demon. When the demon says that you have to relive your life again and again, with all its pain and misery, for all eternity, your reply is to impose narrative on the misery, view it aesthetically, and say: "I willed it thus." (Nietzsche 230)

4.2: Betrayal Is at the Heart of History

In the trilogy, the human stain most readily manifests itself in the characters' unstoppable urge to betray, both each other and their ideals. But betrayal is not simply a basic theme in the trilogy, it is identified – by the sagely voice of Murray – as the most fundamental theme of literature in general. "It's a very big subject, betrayal," says Murray to Zuckerman. And he tells him how he got hold of a copy of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as a young man, that he read it, loved it, but was also puzzled by it. Says Murray: "Every one of us, [Burton] says, has the predisposition for melancholy, but only some of us get the habit of melancholy. How do you get the habit? That's a question that Burton doesn't answer." From a lifetime of personal experience, Murray has found out: "You get the habit by being betrayed. What does it is betrayal." (185) And he goes on to list Shakespeare's great tragedies, and the most famous stories from the Old Testament, identifying betrayal at the center of all these stories:

> Othello – betrayed. Hamlet – betrayed. Lear – betrayed. You might even claim that Macbeth is betrayed – by himself – though that's not the same thing. Professionals who've spent their energy teaching masterpieces, the few of us still engrossed by literature's scrutiny of things, have no excuse for finding betrayal anywhere but at the heart of history. History from top to bottom. World history, family history, personal history … Just think of the Bible. What's that book about? The master story situation of the Bible is betrayal. Adam – betrayed. Esau – betrayed. The Shechemites – betrayed. Judah – betrayed. Joseph – betrayed. Moses – betrayed. Samson – betrayed. Samuel – betrayed. David – betrayed. Uriah – betrayed. Job – betrayed. Job betrayed by whom? By none other than God himself. And don't forget the betrayal of God. God betrayed. Betrayed by our ancestors at every turn. (185)

And, of course, betrayal is the center of the story we are reading. Murray should perhaps add more explicitly that being a traitor is a very big part of the subject of betrayal – that Adam is not just betrayed, he is also a traitor.

The first act of betrayal –the watershed act, the one that creates precedence – is the betrayal of the father. It is not for nothing that the story of the Garden of Eden is invoked in the closing pages of *American Pastoral*, with its dual yet mutually exclusive moral: that transgression (betrayal) is necessary in order to reach enlightenment, but that it comes at a terrible cost (this passage will be discussed more thoroughly in 4.5).

Ousting the Father

Both Zuckerman and his protagonists by and large all follow the pattern of the story of the Garden of Eden (which naturally says more about the archetypal nature of the story than the American trilogy):

The Swede betrays his father by allowing the "Jew in him" to be lost from view, and not passing it on to the next generation. Therein lies the seed of all his misfortune, at least that is what he thinks to himself, according to Zuckerman: "He should have listened to his father and never married [Dawn]. He had defied him, just that one time, but that was all it had taken – that did it." (*Pastoral* 385)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Coleman, when he finds himself at the depths of crisis, on shore leave as a young sailor. Having been thrown in the gutter after trying to buy sex in a white brothel – when he for the first time, having enlisted in the navy as white, tries to reap the awards of being white – he thinks to himself: "This was what came of failing to fulfill his father's ideals, of flouting his father's commands, of deserting his dead father altogether." (*Stain* 182) And he imagines that he hears his

father speaking to him from beyond the grave: "What else grandiose are you planning, Coleman Brutus? Whom next are you going to mislead and betray?" (183)

Ira, on the other hand, does not have a father to betray. He grows up virtually an orphan, with no father to civilize him, to induct him into the tribal ways. Like Merry Levov he thus grows up without this fixed center, and turns out to be capable of performing the most heinous of transgressive acts, namely murdering another man. Those who do not have a father to betray, it seems to be implied, end up more likely to be capable of betraying humanity. And Johnny O'Day's indictment of Ira thus rings truer than both Murray and Zuckerman would like it to: To O'Day, Ira is

> … [a]lways impersonating and never the real thing. Because he was tall, that made him Lincoln? Because he spouted "the masses, the masses," that made him revolutionary? He wasn't a revolutionary, he wasn't a Lincoln, he wasn't anything. He wasn't a man – he impersonates being a man along with everything else. (*Communist* 288)

Ira and Murray come from the same starting point, but whereas Murray gets out as quickly as he can, and through *Bildung* becomes a civilized man, Ira is forever the outsider. He compensates by being a brute who divides the world up into black and white, right and wrong, capitalist and communist.

Zuckerman's present condition in *I Married a Communist* is one of melancholy, and through his recollections of his youth, we see how he too got the habit – through betraying his successive "fathers". Looking back, he sees that the young Zuckerman "has no choice but to … betray the father" by becoming Ira's "little Tom Paine", and thus he heads for his life's first pitfall. "And then, all on his own – providing real unity to his existence – [he] step[s] from pit to pit for the rest of his days …" (32) Quickly he throws off Ira and his progressive politics when he becomes a college student, and falls under the sway of the young professor Leo Glucksman – who teaches him that his political writing is worthless and that art should only exist for art's sake. Glucksman is betrayed by the simple fact that Zuckerman does not turn out to be the fey aesthete Glucksman wants him to be, and he in turn is ousted, albeit briefly, by *Ira's* old mentor Johnny O'Day, when Zuckerman considers chucking everything in at college and become a full-time communist pamphleteer.

> All [these men] were remarkable to me in their own way, personalities to contend with, mentors who embodied or espoused powerful ideas and who first taught me to navigate the world and its claims, the adopted parents

> who also, each in turn had to be cast off with their legacy, had to disappear, thus making way for the orphanhood that is total, which is manhood. (217)

This is the old Zuckerman's account of how the young Zuckerman ousted his successive "fathers" in his quest for a fertile artistic stance. But this casting off – and betraying – of fathers/mentors is described as a necessary part of becoming an adult. Betrayal is inevitable – and its consequences are endlessly painful.

Moral Responsibility

The old Zuckerman, however, the one who is writing, has betrayed – or at least alienated – a great deal more people. We know he has alienated his family – both his deceased parents and his estranged brother – and we must assume that his fourth wife, though she was still with him at the end of *The Facts*, has been jettisoned permanently as well. Zuckerman, alone in his shack, is loyal only to his art and treacherous in relation to mostly everything else. (Up until the narration of the three novels of the American trilogy, that is, which becomes a reassessment of his values.) And this is what Murray berates him for when he tells him to "beware of the utopia of isolation" (317) He uses the word "utopia" in another connection, when talking about Eve, which illustrates what he means to say to Zuckerman: "Ira called his utopian dream Communism, Eve called hers Sylphid. The parent's utopia of the perfect child, the actress's utopia of let's pretend, the Jew's utopia of not being Jewish, to name only the grandest of her projects to deodorize life and make it palatable." (179) By having retreated to his cabin, Zuckerman has renounced a moral commitment to the world beyond his doorstep. And Murray points out that this is just another way of attempting to deodorize life.

The motivation for Zuckerman's utopia of solitude is probably to live beyond the reach of betrayal – both being betrayed and being the traitor. Zuckerman has not just out-Lonoffed Lonoff, he has out-O'Dayed O'Day; he is as singular as O'Day in his determination to disengage from the world of human mess (a disengagement O'Day justifies with his ideology). Zuckerman remembers his younger self's encounter with O'Day's quarters: "It was as though whatever wasn't in that room had vanished from the world … I had a sense … of O'Day's having, almost sinisterly, torn *himself* away from everything that was not this existence." (227) O'Day lives beyond betrayal, because he lives beyond human connections. His loyalty is to the cause, everything else

becomes subsidiary. Zuckerman's shack has another genealogy: The "spiritual essence" of O'Day's quarters is Lenin's bed-sit in Zürich. Its "aesthetic of the ugly" leaves "a man lonely and monastic but also unencumbered, free to be bold and unflinching and purposeful." (227-228) But this boldness, this freedom, is dangerous, because it is separated from human affairs. Hence Zuckerman's realization on the penultimate page of *The Human Stain* that he must re-engage with the world. He arrives at this realization after encountering Les Farley, but it is rather the menace that Farley represents – which is nothing less than the presence of evil in the world – that brings him to this conclusion. It is a menace that cannot be dealt with from the utopia or pastoral that is a two room shack way out in the wilderness.

4.3: Weequahic, Newark – Zuckerman's Combray

Milan Kundera writes that Roth's nostalgia for his parents' world gives his work "not only an aura of tenderness but an entire novelistic background: the background of another era." Furthermore, Kundera believes that history has accelerated in his and Roth's lifetime, and that history unfolds so fast that the links with the past are in constant danger of being broken. Thus the task of the novelist becomes "to preserve that sense of continuity which is being lost, to capture that fugitive sense of historical time". (Kundera [1988b] 165) For both Roth and Zuckerman, their parents' world is intrinsically linked to Newark, and more specifically to the once predominantly Jewish section of Weequahic of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Through the process of being narrator and author, Zuckerman tries to come to terms with the fact that that world is irretrievably lost. The American trilogy is a statement of nostalgia for his parents' world, a eulogy for the world which both he and his three protagonists lived in for a short time in the immediate postwar era, when they were poised, ready to be immersed in their destinies, in History. Walter Benjamin writes that "[t]here is a dual will to happiness, a dialectics of happiness. A hymnic and an elegiac form. The one is the unheard-of, the unprecedented; the other, the eternal repetition, the eternal restoration of the original, the first happiness." (Benjamin 206). The restoration in fiction of the Newark of the 40s and 50s constitutes Zuckerman's elegiac will to happiness.

Newark as Reflection

The American trilogy is full of characters – especially Swede and Lou Levov, and Murray Ringold – for whom the "health" of Newark is intrinsically linked to their own:

The Swede tries to keep the Newark Maid glove factory, his patrimony, going in Newark, and the result is that it is caught in the riots of the 1960s, and he ends up on the brink of bankruptcy. The Swede is compelled to make the "imperialistic" move, in Merry's eyes at least, of moving the factory abroad to a poorer country with more docile workers. Later, when the Swede eventually finds his fugitive daughter after she has been on the run for five years, emaciated and living in squalor, it is in a dilapidated part of Newark. There he thinks to himself: "It was Newark that was entombed here. The pyramids of Newark: as huge and dark and hideously impermeable as a great dynasty's burial edifice has every historical right to be." (*Pastoral* 219) Just being there brings him, in the space of a few short analeptic paragraphs, back into the past, to the start of his father's glove business, how he was taught the business as a child – the mantra being "You work at it" (221) – but, upon seeing his daughter, now a Jain, and her living quarters, he concludes that the Levovs are as entombed as Newark – "working at it" has become a useless formula: "Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with a people. And now the fourth had come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world." (237) The Swede may have been living the perfect life in Old Rimrock, and may have hanged on for as long as he could with the factory in Newark, but eventually he pulls out, and the increasingly decaying Newark becomes his very own Dorian Gray portrait: While he himself still looks blandly successful, the entombed Newark is the true picture of his mental state, and of the state of his family and his tribe.[18]

Murray Ringold also stubbornly refuses to leave Newark for the suburbs, as all his "old cronies" (*Communist* 317) – and Zuckerman's parents – do; the elegy for the loss of Newark is simultaneously an indictment of the suburbanization of America, and

[18] Michael Kimmage even goes so far as to suggest that the magnitude of tragedies that strike the protagonists of the American trilogy is proportional to how far they have traveled, both mentally and physically, from Newark. Notwithstanding that Coleman is actually not from Newark, but from East Orange, I think that is applying too simplistic a formula to the metaphor.

the subsequent rise of the suburb culture.[19] Murray ignores the fact that he is mugged twice, he will not stop teaching English in the Newark high school system, and in the end his wife is murdered on her way home from work. "[I was h]ad by myself ... with all my principles," Murray says. "I can't betray my brother. I can't betray my teaching. I can't betray the disadvantaged of Newark ... When you loosen yourself ... from all the obvious delusions ... you're still left with the myth of your own goodness. Which is the final delusion" (317-318). In other words, these characters are caught in a lose-lose situation: The historical forces that are changing their world are beyond their control. The disbanding of the tribe, the erosion of civil society in their city – these are the things they cannot affect through their own actions, but which still so deeply and thoroughly affect their lives.

Prelapsarian Newark

What does Zuckerman's prelapsarian Newark look like? In an interview with The New York Times in 2000, Philip Roth said:

> "When I was growing up in Newark in the 30s and 40s, we were all – Irish, Italians, Slavs, blacks, Jews – settled and secure in different neighborhoods. There was barely any social overlap and the black population was, in fact, relatively small in those days. Newark didn't begin becoming the preponderantly black city that it is today until about 1950, when I was leaving for college." ("McGrath Interview")

This is, ironically, as much a description of a pastoral ideal – not to say idyll – as much as it is a description of a historical reality. Or maybe it is just another illustration of the subjective nature of remembrance? In the 30s and 40s, when Roth/Zuckerman was a child, he tells us the Jews of Newark were "settled and secure" – but that everything started to change around 1950 – "when I was leaving for college", in other words, when Roth/Zuckerman became a man.

On first impression, it seems as though Roth has segregated "his" Newark along ethnic or racial lines, but that is not so. In this interview, as well as in the trilogy, neither race nor ethnicity is what really occupies Roth. What sets these groups – "Irish, Italians, Slavs, blacks, Jews" – apart is not based on genes, but on culture. A

[19] The massive demographic movement from cities to suburbs in the twentieth century is also an expression of the pastoral ideal, according to Leo Marx: "An inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt towards urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for suburbs)." (Marx 5)

digression into *The Counterlife* illustrates my point. There, Zuckerman enters into a heated discussion with his Gentile lover Maria over race, over their alleged racial difference. Maria says that she normally shies away from the attention from Jewish men, that she finds "[a]ll the shiksa-fancying" irritating. "It *is* a racial matter," she insists. This, of course, gets Zuckerman going, and the dialogue is as follows:

> "No, we're the same race. You're thinking of Eskimos," [says Zuckerman]. "We are not the same race. Not according to anthropologists, or whoever measures these things. There's Caucasian, Semitic – there are about five different groups. Don't look at me like that." "I can't help it. Some nasty superstitions always tend to crop up when people talk about a Jewish 'race'." … "[A]ll I can tell you is that you are a different race. We're supposed to be closer to Indians than to Jews, actually. I'm talking about Caucasians." "But I am a Caucasian, kiddo. In the U.S. census I am, for good or bad, counted as Caucasian." (*Counterlife* 70-71)

The something that sets these groups apart from each other is of a *tribal* nature. They are different tribes, with different customs, traditions, habits etcetera. "Tribe" is a better and more precise word than "ethnicity" or "race" in describing what is on Roth's mind when he is, as always, hampering on about Jews. To Roth, and to Zuckerman, being a Jew is a *tribal* question. The Newark of Roth and Zuckerman's youth was divided up into areas occupied by different tribes. The tribe, for Zuckerman as well as for Swede and Coleman, is both where you get your nourishment and security, and the thing from which you have to break away. And Zuckerman, like his creator, leaves his childhood world before it goes through some cataclysmic demographic changes. Today, Zuckerman's Newark is gone, physically destroyed, demolished in the riots of the 1960s, one of the many manifestations of how, in the 60s, in the words of Maxine Schwartz Seller, Jews and other "white ethnics found themselves in city after city facing blacks in ugly confrontations over neighborhoods, jobs, schools, and often political control of the city itself". (Seller 284)

The historical accuracy of Roth's version of how Newark became a crime ridden inferno after the riots of the 1960s has been questioned and objected to, for instance by Larry Schwartz. He writes:

> In these books, there is a willingness to stereotype post-1965 Newark as a crime-ridden burnt-out city of Blacks and, unfortunately, to contribute to a liberal, racist mentality about Newark ... [W]hen imagining the racial politics of Newark, Roth the hard-edged, thoughtful, and ironical realist, becomes a conservative 'utopian' – too much caught up in the interplay between his liberal, civil rights conscience and his sentimentalizing of Weequahic. (Schwartz)

He then proceeds to take apart Roth's factual justifications for nostalgia with statistics and historical facts about the changing demographics of Newark. However, though the charge of racism, however unjustified, of course is serious enough, the point is not whether or not Roth's depiction of Newark is historically accurate. It feels accurate to Zuckerman and the protagonists of the American trilogy. And what matters is not the accuracy, but the state of mind the memory of the Weequahic of the 1940s and 50s invokes for them. Roth's Newark of yore is a fiction as much as Yoknapatawpha County is a fiction, as much as Combray is a fiction – the only difference being that the latter two also have fictitious names. Furthermore, one can, as Timothy Parrish does, read a conciliatory tone into the ending of *The Human Stain*. There Zuckerman is on his way to Sunday dinner in Newark with the Silk family, and on a metaphorical level, he is on his way to be reconciled with the Newark of today. "The black neighborhoods of Newark which so repulsed Zuckerman in *The Anatomy Lesson* and seemed to him to mark the annihilation of his own cultural history become through the mediating figure of Ernestine a place where Zuckerman can visit and commune." (Parrish [2004] 456)

Zuckerman's Nostalgia

The (nostalgic) theme of Newark is probably what constitutes the strongest link between the American trilogy and the previous Zuckerman books. And it is what explains Zuckerman's need to imagine Newark's downfall through other people's stories. Newark's demolished state is present as an undercurrent of uneasiness in *Zuckerman Bound*. It is something Zuckerman is thoroughly reminded of via the character Alvin Pepler, Zuckerman's stalker and fellow Newark native. Pepler is Zuckerman's caricatured double, his weird alter ego – if Zuckerman is Roth cranked up to eleven, Pepler is Zuckerman cranked up to seventeen or so. Pepler's jealous claim to fame is being a quiz-show contestant disgraced for cheating, and being another "famous" Newark native somehow, in his mind, ties him to Zuckerman. "What do you know about Newark, Mama's Boy!" Pepler shouts to Zuckerman:

> To you it's Sunday chop suey downtown at the Chink's! To you it's being Leni-Lenape Indians at school in the play! To you it's Uncle Max in his undershirt, watering radishes at night! And Nick Etten at first for the Bears! Nick Etten! Moron! *Moron!* Newark is a nigger with a knife! Newark is a whore with the syph! Newark is junkies shitting in your hallway and everything burned to the ground! Newark is dago vigilantes

> hunting jigs with tire irons! Newark is bankruptcy! Newark is ashes! Newark is rubble and filth! … But what the hell would you know up on the hoity-toity East Side of Manhattan? (*Bound* 243)

Indeed, what the hell would Zuckerman know? Alvin Pepler is in a way right: Zuckerman cannot know himself how Newark disappeared. He makes repeated references how he himself was not really there in the American trilogy. For instance: "I … wasn't around Newark again for years …" (*Communist* 3) he says of the Ringolds' HUAC ordeals; "I was away at college when I heard …" of the Swede's marriage (*Pastoral* 15); and "This passed me by. I had no idea," (69) of the crimes of Merry Levov. And as his father says, in a scene from *I Married a Communist*, to one of Zuckerman's first girlfriends:

> "We lost Nathan when he was sixteen. Sixteen and he left us." By which he meant that I [Zuckerman] had left *him.* Years later he would use the same words with my wives. "Sixteen and he left us." By which he meant that all my mistakes in life had flowed from that precipitate departure of mine.
> He was right, too. If it weren't for my mistakes I'd still be sitting on the front stoop. (*Communist* 107)

(That last sentence is not quite correct. He could not still be sitting on the front stoop because the front stoop as he knew it is gone.)

At the end of *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman seeks out – in a limousine, no less – both the apartment he lived in as a baby and his old house. The old apartment building is completely ravaged, and the house is surrounded by a barbwire fence. Out of the door comes an intimidating young black man with a German shepherd dog, and he asks Zuckerman: "Who you supposed to be?" No one, replies Zuckerman, and he thinks to himself: "You are no longer any man's son, you are no longer some good woman's husband, you are no longer your brother's brother, and you don't come from anywhere anymore, either." (*Bound* 292). In other words, Zuckerman recognizes his total orphanhood, "which is manhood" (*Communist* 217), but nevertheless he remains irredeemably himself; Jewish, Newarkian. The one volume version of the trilogy is called *Zuckerman Bound*. Apart from the obvious reference to Aeschylus' play(s) about the myth of Prometheus, and the fact that three books and a novella are bound in one book, I believe it also refers to the fact that Zuckerman is irredeemably bound to his own biography and background, contrary as that is both to all his efforts to break free and to the Adamic ideal of the American dream. He is as bound to his history and

his biography as the three protagonists of the American trilogy. However, the world which significant parts of that biography were linked to is gone.

By the end of *Zuckerman Bound*, we have read the entire story of Zuckerman's own immersion is America. In *The Counterlife*, he winds up in exile in England with his gentile English wife. There he grows a rabbinical beard and starts spotting anti-Semitism everywhere in the world of genteel Englishness (in other words, he is turning back into a member of his – disappeared – tribe rather than just being an expatriate, a tribalist rather than a pluralist). And he insists that should they have a son, he would have to become circumcised, because "[c]ircumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity" (*Counterlife* 323).

However, the Zuckerman we encounter in the American trilogy is approaching the autumn of his life. And now he seems to remember a world of "strifeless unity" after all. Hence all the references Zuckerman makes to his role as repository of memory. He seems to be doing penance, by recreating the great Newark of yore in his fiction. He repents for the fact that he himself was not there to witness its decline and fall – he was "up on the hoity-toity East Side of Manhattan" instead. Eventually he redeems himself by recording "what might otherwise be forgotten". And in the process he pays homage to those who soldiered on, on behalf of Newark – Murray, Swede, Lou Levov – in the face of insurmountable opposition.

4.4: American Myth vs. Reality

Milan Kundera differentiates between the two ways in which history plays a part in the novel: "[T]here is on the one hand the novel that examines *the historical dimension of human existence,* and on the other the novel that is *the illustration of a historical situation,* the description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography." (Kundera [1988a] 36) The American trilogy is about the historical dimension of human existence more than being a treatise on the deterministic forces of history.

Fettered to History

One of the fundamental themes is that it is impossible to live an insular life, to protect one's destiny from the historical forces. Zuckerman puts it thus in *The Human Stain*:

> The man who decides to forge a distinct historical destiny, who sets out to spring the historical lock, and who does so, brilliantly succeeds at altering his personal lot, only to be ensnared by the history he hadn't quite counted on: the history that isn't yet history, the history that the clock is now ticking off, the history proliferating as I write, accruing a minute at a time and grasped better by the future than it ever will by us. The we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one's country, the stranglehold of history that is one's own time. (*Stain* 335-336)

All three protagonists in the American trilogy – and Zuckerman himself, of course – decide "to forge a distinct historical destiny", and all encounter the inescapable we of their present moment.

Even the young Zuckerman is aware that his protagonists are chained to history, but it is only with hindsight that he knows what the consequences of that is. The Swede is "fettered to history, an instrument of history …" (*Pastoral* 5) Of Ira, he thinks: "I'd never known anyone so immersed in his moment or so defined by it. Or tyrannized by it, so much its avenger and its victim and its tool." (*Communist* 189) The young Zuckerman thinks the history of his generation is going to be a primrose path to American glory, but of course it turns out to be the path to ruin.

Is this a deterministic view of history? Debra Shostak thinks so. She writes that Roth here "turns toward an unprecedentedly deterministic conception of history as the context for American subjectivity". (Shostak 234) However, the word "determinism" implies that there is a direction to history, and that its code can somehow be cracked. And what Zuckerman realizes is precisely the opposite. He thinks to himself: "What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *Nobody* knows …" (*Stain* 208-209) His protagonists – in an act of hubris – think they have somehow cracked the code. Ira, for instance, thinks he "has pulled off a great big act of control over the story that was his life". (*Communist* 60) And the Swede thinks he has isolated his familial happiness by moving to Old Rimrock, away from the decaying Newark.

The American Adam

In forging their own destinies, they are all pursuing a distinctly American myth. Roth is playing with certain American archetypes and myths in this trilogy, perhaps most prevalently that of the American man as an Adam, and his path of life as an advent into a virgin land. In his book *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis describes this myth and

its treatment in literature over a few decades in the nineteenth century. A recurrent theme in the literature from this period is the rise of the hero from poverty to wealth. Wealth and success are available to anyone as long as they have ability and work hard, their destinies are in their own hands, nothing is pre-ordained by class or birthright. Lewis describes the figure that embodied the possibilities of the country thus:

> [A]n individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising ... that the new hero ... was most easily identified with Adam before the fall. (Lewis 5)[20]

Lewis was a critic of the so-called "myth and symbol school" of American literary theory, a loose group whose members attempted to identify how certain cultural symbols came to hold such a powerful sway on the American psyche, especially the prevalence of the pastoral as an ideal – the myth of the garden.[21] Old Rimrock of course more or less appears as *the* Virgin Land to the Swede, as he hikes through the landscape, imagining himself to be Johnny Appleseed. And it is of course no coincident that the Levovs live on Arcady Hill Road – Virgil's Arcadia being the defining statement of the pastoral ideal.

The reason for playing with these rather well-worn notions are probably that the immediate postwar era for Zuckerman and his protagonists embody a similar type of sentiment: The Depression was history, the war was won, the young soldiers were back, and as Zuckerman says, "the G.I. Bill [was] inviting them to break out in ways they could not have imagined possible before the war". (*Pastoral* 40) Zuckerman, the Swede and Coleman – the latter being one of the soldiers getting a classics degree via the G.I. Bill – were expecting to be such "new heroes" as Lewis' American Adam. Zuckerman describes this ebullient postwar optimism in his ungiven high school reunion speech thus: "Our class started high school ... during the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history ... Everything was in motion ... Americans

[20] The presence of Adamism in *American Pastoral* has been discussed by Brian McDonald, and myth and symbol school notions in general by Sandra Kumamoto Stanley.
[21] The two classic texts on these topics are Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land. The American West as Symbol and Myth* and Leo Marx' *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*.

were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together ... *the clock of history reset and a whole people's aims limited no longer by the past*." (40-41, my italics)

And it is of course the Swede that reconnects the aging Zuckerman to this spirit, the Swede reminds him how the optimism felt, how being "fettered to history" once did not feel like a blueprint for tragedy, and he feels a sense of wonder and bewilderment over what became of this singularly American hope, because to him, at least to the young him, the Swede really is the embodiment of this American Adam. Zuckerman thinks of receiving a letter from the Swede: "Ridiculously, perhaps, at the onset of old age, I had only to see his signature at the foot of the letter to be swamped by memories of him … that were some fifty years old and still captivating." (18) The failure of Swede – as well as Zuckerman's own "washed-out state" (*Stain* 37) – are symptoms of a malady at the heart of the American myth. By abandoning the we of the family or tribe, Swede and Zuckerman are powerless to withstand the we of history, or more precisely, the we of the present moment. Debra Shostak argues that the large amount of prostate cancers Zuckerman finds among his peers is a symptom of a more general malady, that these cancers "might be seen as deeply historical. Nathan's generation has been made impotent by their desires, by the image they thought they were recreating in their own lives." (Shostak 248-249)

The Fall of Adam

The time span of the trilogy – circa 1945 to 1998 – is bookended by two similar historical moments, thus giving the entire half-century a kind of thematic unity.

The optimism – Zuckerman's and the society's in general – of the first postwar years is caught, through the advent of McCarthyism, in the stranglehold of a public betrayal of the most fundamental American belief, namely that you are free to believe and to say what you want, as it is written in the first Amendment to the Constitution. This is the way Murray Ringold puts it:

> I think of the McCarthy era as inaugurating the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic. In Gossip We Trust. Gossip as gospel, the national faith. McCarthyism as the beginning not just of serious politics but of serious everything as entertainment to amuse the mass audience. McCarthyism as the first postwar flowering of the American unthinking which is now everywhere. (*Communist* 284)

Zuckerman's first university teacher, Leo Glucksman, says that "people give up too easily and fake their feelings. They want to have feelings right away, and so 'shocked' and 'moved' are the easiest. The stupidest. Except for the rare case ... shock is always fake." (219). He is speaking here of art, of the propagandistic radio plays young Zuckerman has produced and the emotions their author wants them to produce in the listener. But McCarthy was not just a politician, he was also a performer. In Murray's view, "McCarthy understood better than any American politician before him that ... [they] could do far better for themselves by performing; McCarthy understood the entertainment value of disgrace and how to feed the pleasures of paranoia." (284) In other words, he was appealing to people's emotions rather than their more rational faculties. As a performing artist he knew how to arouse the (fake) feeling of shock. A nation was shocked to the core by the "communist conspiracy" in the 40s and 50s, and people were ready to persecute others, not for their actions, but for their beliefs. This was the beginning of what Richard Sennet in *The Fall of Public Man* has called "the tyranny of intimacy". (Sennet 337)

In the world of the American trilogy, there is a straight line between the communist witch-hunt of the late 40s and early 50s, and Coleman Silk's spooks incident, PC-culture and the Clinton/Lewinsky-scandal.[22] As the gossip machine at Athena College starts running wild in its lewd speculations on the nature of Coleman's death, Zuckerman thinks to himself: "It is too late in the century to call him a Communist, though that is the way it used to be done." (*Stain* 290) However, the people who used to throw the Communist label around, belonged to the Right; the politically correct staff at Athena college belongs to the Left. In other words, no clear cut political stance emerges in Zuckerman's ruminations. There is enough sanctimoniousness here to go around for both the Left and the Right. The persecution of President Clinton for his sexual escapades in the Oval office – by the alliance of neoconservative politicians and evangelistic Christians – forms the backdrop for the action in *The Human Stain*. But Coleman Silk is persecuted for the same thing – first

[22] And for Roth, the McCarthy era is also the prelude to the Vietnam War, which forms the backdrop in *American Pastoral*: "I think [the McCarthy era] was the beginning of the Vietnam War, in that it created an atmosphere around communism that was so hysterical that there was no, certainly no Democratic president who could ever be anything but more ferociously anti-Communist than the Republicans, and eventually it led into that ghastly, ghastly Vietnam War." ("Communist Interview")

for the spooks incident, but more zealously for his affair with (read: exploitation of) a poor woman half his age – by the left-leaning academic establishment at Athena College. Thus the political correctness of the academic staff at Athena College is portrayed as perhaps even more laughable than the Starr report.

This duality in Roth's political satire is evident in the two other books as well. In *I Married a Communist*, both Ira and Johnny O'Day are as out of touch with the world of human affairs as the HUAC – they are utopianists who, as Murray puts it, were "not born with the mentality of the carnival – maybe utopianists aren't." (*Communist* 65) In *American Pastoral* leftwing radicalism is lampooned, in the character of Merry and the rest of the Weather underground, as ahistorical and out of touch with reality (as out of touch with reality as Richard Nixon's foreign policies). When Zuckerman at the end of the novel asks us what is reprehensible about the Levovs, some conservative critics have been inclined to suggest that it is their wooly Montessori-school-inspired liberal worldview. Thus they have tried to annex *American Pastoral* as theirs and take it as Roth's mea culpa. *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, for instance, expressed his admiration for *American Pastoral*, but meant that Roth did not have the courage to move further in a neoconservative direction afterwards with his next novel, because the left-leaning literary world would demand retribution. Thus, he wrote, Roth atoned by writing *I Married a Communist*, which according to Podhoretz "amounts to a reassuring declaration of solidarity with his old comrades within the liberal establishment" (Podhoretz 42, quoted in Kimmage). This, I think, misses the ambivalence that saturates *American Pastoral* – and indeed the entire trilogy – an ambivalence that arises from the fact that it does not matter how correctly one does everything in life, one still cannot contain oneself from the chaos of existence. *American Pastoral*, along with both the other novels, is beyond leftwing versus rightwing characterizations. Instead, Roth demonstrates that the urge to purify is almost apolitical, or rather, an integral part of the politics of both the Left and the Right. Anthony Hutchinson puts it succinctly when he writes that: "The broader philosophical context here is one of chastened liberalism – that is, a liberalism alert to the perils of a preoccupation with moral and political purity." (Hutchinson 326-327)

The Self Cannot Be a Project

Although Murray maintains that the McCarthy era inaugurated "the postwar triumph of gossip", he knows that it is a manifestation of the spirit of persecution which is as fundamentally American as the philosophy behind the Bill of Rights. He says that McCarthy "took us back to our origins, back to the seventeenth century and the stocks. That's how the country began: moral disgrace as public entertainment." (*Communist* 284) The very reason that the communist witch hunts were called witch hunts was of course an obvious allusion to the *actual* witch hunts at Salem in the seventeenth century. In *The Human Stain*, the public appetite for moral disgrace reaches its apotheosis in the summer of 1998, when the "black", draft-dodging, womanizing, social climber in the White House is impeached, and Coleman Silk is brought down by the proprietors of good taste at a New England liberal arts college. According to Zuckerman, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal "revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony ... what Hawthorne … identified in the incipient country of long ago as 'the persecuting spirit'." (*Stain* 2) Both Hawthorne's "persecuting spirit", the McCarthyism of the 50s and the "ecstasy of sanctimony" of the late 1990s can be seen as a manifestation of something that has been present in the American mentality since the country's origin. According to Richard Maidment and Anthony McGrew, the persecution of otherness has been a necessity in the forging of a country:

> The society that cherishes the rights of minorities nevertheless has felt uncomfortable, throughout its existence, with individuals or groups that deviated from the mainstream. On several occasions, of which McCarthyism is only one, this sense of discomfort has turned sour and degenerated into harassment of these groups with all the consequent infringements of their civil liberties. Why has there been this continuous desire for conformity? The explanation may be that there has been, and to some extent still is, a need to forge a new American identity out of a diverse social and religious heritage. (Maidment & McGrew 19)

In other words, the American Adam does not necessarily arise by choice. If you want to take part of the bounty of America, and prosper through your own means and abilities, you are *forced* to sever yourself from your past. And you are forced to conform to the values and standards of the hegemonic group, namely the Wasps, who are in control and decide who is allowed into the melting pot, for lack of a better word. But this is a treacherous alliance, one that leaves you on your own when the winds of

history start to blow. And this is what happens to the protagonists of the American trilogy. The Swede, says Derek Parker-Royal, is one of those Jews who attempts to hide or shun their Jewishness, and thus "find themselves without a people to call their own" (Parker-Royal 11), something that is even more true for his daughter. Ira never had a people to call his own to begin with; he grew up practically an orphan, a lone Jew in the predominantly Italian First Ward of Newark. Coleman, as is oft-repeated, "lost himself to all his people" (*Stain* 146) when he crossed his Rubicon of race. And Zuckerman's own loneliness is also the result of the way he has cut all ties. Rather than becoming free individuals, they end up in a state of solitude that is desperate, or rather the freedom they achieve is an extremely lonely one. It is also striking that all three protagonist, in making themselves new, even try to make their way into the inner sanctum of Gentile gentility: The Swede tries to make his life in Old Rimrock, in a colonial stone house, surrounded by bigots, and in the end, he ironically loses his *shiksa* wife to Bill Orcutt, a man who can trace his American lineage back to the Revolution. Ira marries Eve, herself a self-hating Jew, who has invented a Gentile background for herself, and in doing so, he – with a great degree of self-satisfied pleasure – mixes with her crowd, among them the venomous Grants, who of course loathe him and will turn out to be his downfall (they are the true authors of Eve's memoir). Eve has learned her anti-Semitism from her previous husband, Carlton Pennington, her "Gentile mentor", and according to Murray, that was her crime: "To launch yourself undisturbed by the past into America – that's your choice. The crime isn't even bringing an anti-Semite close to you ... The crime is being unable to stand up to him ... and taking his attitudes for yours. *In America, as I see it, you can allow yourself every freedom but that one*." (*Communist* 158, my italics) Coleman passes as a Jew, but even still, he chooses to teach at a college in one of the whitest areas in America.

Furthermore, Ernestine Silk says, "I think [Coleman] himself came to believe that there was something awful about withholding something so crucial" (*Stain* 320) from his children as their genealogy, that it was their birthright to know, and that it was even dangerous to keep them in the dark. The final irony is of course that Coleman is buried as a Jew, and his youngest son Mark, wearing a yarmulke, chants the Kaddish at his grave. It is this final irony that seems to be lost on those who claim Coleman to be some sort of advocate for postmodern ethnicity-as-performance. Brett

Ashley Kaplan, for instance, argues that Coleman, like Anatole Broyard, the real-life literary critic on whom he supposedly is based, is an example of someone who, through perpetual performance [of race], has "a postracial consciousness that disbands the confining categorizations that enable racism". (Kaplan 142) And Mark Maslan's reading of *The Human Stain* concludes that "Roth's admiration for Coleman is unqualified." (Maslan 380n) I think Ross Posnock is more correct in maintaining that "Roth discerns a fatal purism in the very assumption that the self is a project." (Posnock 89) Perhaps that is the most fundamental thing that Zuckerman's useful fictions investigate: Can the self – as the myth of the American Adam promises – be a project? Is the self plastic and fluid, with no unalterable basis? I believe that Zuckerman's answer is a resounding no. And that the American trilogy perhaps has its true genesis in the closing section of *The Counterlife*, where Zuckerman finds himself increasingly uncomfortable with the genteel English countryside, and the rabid anti-Semitism he finds under the polite surface. That is where he realizes that being a Jew, i.e. belonging to that certain tribe – circumcision and all – is more important to him than he had previously thought. But this is a realization that comes to him too late; at this point, he too has "lost himself to all his people", which explains his self-imposed exile in the American trilogy.

The Banality of History

Sandra Kumanamoto Stanley asks, on behalf of the Swede, "In marrying his Irish American wife and moving to Old Rimrock, did [he] separate his daughter from Jewish roots? Or was this wound inflicted by larger historical forces?" (Stanley 11) The answer is that these two questions are intertwined; by separating his daughter from her Jewish roots, he took away from her the power to resist the larger historical forces. But in the end, it is not only the forces of history that cause the downfall of the three protagonists. There seems to be something more like a transcendental force that metes out the punishment for voluntary deracination – the forces of history only enact the punishment. Coleman, for instance, defies his fate – that of being a black man – and commits a crime, metaphorically killing his mother. He tries to get away with it by committing a new "crime"; marrying a white woman and begetting white (deracinated) children. But there is a reason that the epigraph of the novel is taken from *Oedipus the King*; like Oedipus, Coleman is doomed in trying to escape his fate. It is only a matter

of time before fate comes back to reap its revenge. But history is not responsible for his downfall, that was an inevitability he brought on himself. However, history is responsible for the *banality* of his downfall. As Coleman, via Zuckerman, thinks to himself: "Spooks! To be undone by a word that no one even speaks anymore. To hang him on that was, for Coleman, to banalize everything – the elaborate clockwork of his lie, the beautiful calibration of his deceit, *everything*. Spooks!" (*Stain* 334-335)

4.5: The Poverty of Non-Referential Discourse

Ernestine Silk is somewhat of a "privileged" character in *The Human Stain*. She is the only character of note – apart from Coleman in the beginning – who is not mostly imagined by Zuckerman. The Faunia and the Delphine we encounter are almost wholly products of Zuckerman's imagination. The adult Ernestine, however, is only *reported* by Zuckerman. She emerges as a deus ex machina character at Coleman's funeral, holding the key to Zuckerman's narrative, painting him a picture of Coleman's youth. Her plain-spokenness and commonsensical eloquence makes her similar to Murray, they are revered by Zuckerman for a similar kind of sageliness. (Though her old-fashioned sexual morals are perhaps not that admired – she does not want to hear a word of Zuckerman's speculations on the nature of Coleman and Faunia's relationship. In a Roth novel, passion at an advanced age seems to be reserved for men only.) Ernestine is an aged survivor, who may not have lost the battle of life, but who is not on the winning side either. And all that there is still time for her to do is to point out how everything has changed, and not much for the better.

Towards the end of the novel, Zuckerman relates the lengthy conversation he has had with Ernestine after he acquaints himself with her in the graveyard. She laments the fact that the America, and more specifically the New Jersey, she – and Zuckerman – grew up in, has perished, that once, "All of life was there in little East Orange..." but it has been replaced with nothing but Domino's Pizzas and Dunkin' Donuts. And Zuckerman continues to himself, not just paraphrasing Ernestine, but using her statement to echo his own sentiments:

> All of life was there in East Orange. And when? Before urban renewal. Before the classics were abandoned. Before they stopped giving out the Constitution to high school graduates. Before there were remedial classes in the colleges teaching kids what they should have learned in ninth grade. Before Black History Month. Before they built the parkway ...

> Before everything changed ... That's when it was all different – before. And, she lamented, it will never be the same again, not in East Orange or anywhere else in America. (332)

This comes at the end of her lamentation on the standard of *Bildung* among the youth of today, and that the educational system, instead of trying to improve the students, lowers the demands placed on them. She says that "it used to be the person who fell short. Now it's the discipline." (330)

And, she says, "you can tell the generation I am ... I say 'colored' and 'Negro'." (317) These words have gone out of the younger generation's vocabulary because they are offensive, the offensiveness stemming from the history of the use of the words. They have been replaced with more neutral terms, as if neutral terms could eradicate history. As if centuries of injustice could be atoned for by having Black History Month every February in high school, devoted to famous black individuals in history, like Matthew Henson the explorer, Charles Drew the doctor. But, says Ernestine:

> I'm impatient with Black History Month altogether. I liken having Black History Month in February and concentrating study to milk that's just about to go sour. You can still drink it, but it just doesn't taste right. If you're going to study and find out about Matthew Henson, then it seems to me that you do Matthew Henson when you do other explorers." (329)

For Ernestine, Black History Month is just a type of newspeak; devoting a month to "Black History" is not in any way grand, it is belittling – designed to segregate the black explorers from the white explorers and the black doctors from the white doctors. It does not help to stop saying colored and Negro if the sentiments these words once expressed are the same.

This attitude, however, is not confined to the high school system, it has made its way further up the echelons of education, and at Athena College it, of course, reaches its apotheosis with the spooks incident. Says Ernestine when she finds out the circumstances surrounding Coleman's resignation: "[W]ith every passing day, the words I hear spoken strike me as less and less of a description of what things really are ... One has to be so terribly frightened of every word she uses?" (328-329)

Theorizing Literature

A literature professor or a linguist would probably say to Ernestine Silk that words are not descriptions of what thing "really are", but that they are random terms used to

designate various things. And we encounter such a literature professor in the novel – Delphine Roux, Coleman's nemesis, who has made her name by being at the cutting edge of modern literary theory. And she represents a different version of the newspeak Ernestine encounters in the high school system.

First, though, a minor digression: Another one of Philip Roth's recurring characters, David Kepesh, is a literature professor. In the novel *The Professor of Desire*, he tells his students in his introductory lecture: "You will discover (and not all will approve) that I do not hold with certain of my colleagues who tell us that literature, in its most valuable and intriguing moments, is fundamentally non-referential."[23] (Quoted in *Reading* 102) In other words, he opposes the notion that the text of a work of fiction as a signifier does not have any other signified than itself, or other texts. This is, of course, one of the cornerstones of modern literary theory – of formalism, new criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism and beyond.

Nathan Zuckerman in all probability seconds Kepesh on that issue. And in how he imagines the figure of Delphine Roux, he lampoons the victorious advent of theory in the study of literature at universities in general. It is fruitful to keep *Zuckerman Bound* in mind in the reading of Delphine Roux, especially the first volume, *The Ghost Writer*. There, the serious young artist has recently published his first work of fiction, a volume of stories entitled *Higher Education* (which, it must be said, appears to closely resemble Roth's own *Goodbye Columbus*). But instead of being met with the expected accolades, young Zuckerman is met with outrage from his community (tribe) for writing frankly about its members. One of the tragicomic highlights in the novel is the letter young Nathan receives from Judge Wapter – a pillar of the local community, to whom Nathan's parents have turned to for assistance – asking him to think through the consequences of his art. The first of ten questions to the writer reads thus: "If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?" (*Bound* 74) As Roth has observed of his own experience of encountering his Jewish critics: "[H]aving declared myself for art" – which is the story of the young Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist*, the process by which he declares himself for art (for art's sake) – "*I imagined I had sealed myself off from being a morally unacceptable*

person, in others' eyes as well as my own … For one thing, it yanked me, screaming, out of the classroom; all one's readers, it turned out, weren't New Critics sitting on their cans at Kenyon." (*Reading* 68, my italics)

Delphine Roux, in declaring herself to be for all the "right" things professionally – that is, both academically and politically – also believes herself to be sealed off from being a morally unacceptable person. In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman imagines Coleman's first impression of Delphine Roux, at her job interview, thus:

> [F]or nearly an hour Dean Silk listens to her ... Narrative structure and temporality. The internal contradictions of the work of art ... Narratology. The diegetic. The difference between diegesis and mimesis. The bracketed experience. The proleptic quality of the text. Coleman doesn't have to ask what all this means. He knows, in the original Greek meaning, what all the Yale words mean and what all the École Normale Supérieure words mean. Does she? ... Why does someone so beautiful want *to hide from the human dimension of her experience behind these words*? (*Stain* 189-190, my italics)

Does she know the etymology of her "Yale words"? It is implied that she does not. Hence, thinks Coleman (and Zuckerman), by approaching literature with these terms, they only have the effect of removing it from her experience. In the novel, advocating literary theory with a terminology removed from human experience (Delphine's academic stance), is the same as advocating a morality that does not allow for lived life (her political stance).

However, Delphine, as imagined by Zuckerman, is *conscious* that she is hiding behind her terminology. To herself she recalls the exhilaration she felt when attending a lecture given by (Roth's good friend) Milan Kundera in Paris:

> Kundera's intention in his lectures was to free the intelligence from the French sophistication, to talk about the novel as having something to do with human beings and the comédie humaine; his intention was to free his students from the tempting traps of structuralism and formalism and the obsession with modernity, to purge them of the French theory that they had been fed, and listening to him had been an enormous relief, for despite her publications and a growing scholarly reputation, it was always difficult for her to deal with literature through literary theory. There could be such a gigantic gap between what she liked and what she was supposed to admire. (266-267)

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[23] Philip Roth is, not surprisingly, of the same mind. In an interview he says: "I am not so gentle as my proferssor of desire, Mr. Kepesh. I *forbid* my students to use those words ['structure', 'form' and 'symbols'], on pain of expulsion." (*Reading* 102-103.)

Privately, Delphine is at times "destabilized to the point of shame by the discrepancy between how she must deal with literature in order to succeed professionally and why she first came to literature". (272) In other words, this is a political question for her: She has chosen a set of means – that she does not necessarily believe in – by which she will succeed in the academic world. But this destabilization seeps into her life. She is racked by inner turmoil, resulting from the conflict between how she *feels* (going through a plethora of emotions, not all of them too sanitized) and how she feels she must *appear* (correct – politically, academically and emotionally). She cannot show herself to be having either needs or desires – the sloppier sides of human existence – as that could somehow be misconstrued by someone "to trivialize her". (263)

Delphine has eventually succeeded Coleman as chair of the Department of Languages and Literature, the department into which Coleman's old Classics Department has been absorbed (indeed, the very fact of this annexation of the classics by this vaguer study is a symptom of a general decline, the removal of the subject from its origin). From that position, she becomes the leader of the (post-modern) crusade – both academically and politically – against Coleman (the old-fashioned Humanist) at Athena College.

Ironically, Delphine is in many ways portrayed as a kind of mirror image of Coleman, the arc of her biography resembles his. She is French, i.e. she is not at home at Athena, but has set out to make it on her own in America. Whereas Coleman fled the shackles his tribe imposed on him, Delphine has set out to flee from the shadow of her aristocratic pedigree and her over-achieving mother. However, she lacks something he has got: The gravitas of learning. That is what really sets them apart. And that learning intimidates Delphine:

> The Humanists, the old-fashioned traditionalist humanists who have read everything … make her sometimes feel shallow. Her following they laugh at and her scholarship they despise … Since she doesn't herself have that much conviction about the so-called discourse she picked up in Paris and New Haven, inwardly she crumbles. Only she needs that language to succeed. On her own in America, she needs so much to succeed. (266)

Coleman was also on his own in America, and also badly wanted and needed to succeed. But he, besides feeling the exhilaration that comes from having a gigantic secret, has based his professional life on the classics. And it seems as though his academic foundation puts his own rage and urges in an authentic framework, even if he

has annexed an inauthentic identity.[24] As Zuckerman repeatedly points out, Coleman experiences Achilles' anger, because he has also lost his Briseïs (Steena). He epitomizes that anger. It is no coincidence that *The Iliad* is his favorite work – Coleman has spent his academic life quenching his Achillean rage simply by mastering world literature, specializing in the Greeks. In the classroom, he is popular "precisely because of everything direct, frank, and unacademically forceful in his comportment." (4) At one point, Coleman says that the current young generation "is far and away the dumbest generation in American history". He is having a heated discussion with Delphine about whether or not a young student should be allowed to take a "feminist perspective" on Euripides. Coleman says that he is lucky if he manages to give his students even the *slightest* understanding of Euripides: "To read two plays like Hyppolytus and Alcestis, then to listen to a week of classroom discussion of each, then to have nothing to say about either of them other than that they are 'degrading to women,' isn't a 'perspective,' for Christ's sake – it's mouthwash." (192) The manic puritan adherence to political correctness that Delphine displays in her urge to bring Coleman down in the spooks incident, is just the flip side of theoretic discourse she uses in her work. Coleman can be frank and "unacademic" simply because he has "read everything". Having "read everything" naturally presupposes that there is a definable "everything" that can be read, in other words a canon. Naturally, in the eyes of Delphine et al, the canon of the Humanists cannot be objective in any way, it is defined in accordance with inescapable factors such as gender, ethnicity, culture – factors that decide who is culturally hegemonic. Ironically, through the theoretic discourse that undermines the very possibility of defining an "everything" to be read – by illustrating that even the most objective criteria are nothing but metaphors – the likes of Delphine represent the new hegemonic force in the academic world. She does not need to have

[24] However, by deracinating his children, this authenticity is not passed on to them. This is best illustrated by his youngest son, Mark, who is very similar to his father, equally angry, but truly a pathetic figure. Mark tries to counter his sense of being deracinated with his anger and by becoming an Orthodox Jew. He could be a tragic figure, but he is not – he is simply ridiculous, his chanting of the Kaddish at Coleman's funeral is bathetic rather than pathetic, and he is described by Zuckerman thus: "almost into his forties, having taken up and jettisoned a dozen different jobs to which he had considered himself superior, he had discovered that he was a narrative poet", writing "interminable" biblically inspired poems "that not even the Jewish magazines would publish". (61) Had he only chosen to be a poet, he may have been a figure of some gravitas, but to discover one's talents as a *narrative* poet at the age of thirty eight ... It is that prefix that somehow makes his ambitions plain silly.

read everything, for she is in possession of the theoretical discourse that deems such a task impossible. And by being in charge, they have made it impossible – or "politically incorrect" – to even promulgate the view that something is better than something else. Which makes it possible to say that Euripides is "degrading to women". And in Delphine's insistence on interpreting "spooks" as being meant derogative – it is after all said by a white (Jewish) older man to describe two young black women – she is ignoring the word's etymology, just like she does in her theory.

In the American trilogy, "mouthwash" is what remains of the reading literature when human experience is removed from it. Here, discourse for the sake of discourse is about as valuable as living life without ever getting dirty. Delphine's discourse is an intellectual equivalent of McCarthyism, and "the ecstacy of sanctimony", and these ideologies' preoccupation with moral purity; it deprives literature of its humanity, humanism, its human stain, in the same way as the mindset that first manifest itself with McCarthyism attempts to deprive human experience of any other emotion than being shocked or moved. McCarthy had the power to turn someone into a communist simply by making the claim; Delphine has the power to make Coleman a racist and misogynist by making that claim.

The Garden of Eden – the Moral of the Story

Delphine Roux has a "colleague" who appears towards the end of *American Pastoral* – Marcia Umanoff.

Marcia, a detested "friend" of the Levovs, is present at the dinner party that frames the final section of the book, "Paradise Lost". She is a literature professor in New York, a "difficult person" in Swede's estimate, "a militant nonconformist of staggering self-certainty much given to sarcasm and calculatedly apocalyptic pronouncements designed to bring discomfort to the lords of the earth." (*Pastoral* 339) Whereas Delphine Roux, though somewhat of a caricature, is portrayed as intelligent and talented, Marcia is described as a "slob". (340) Says Dawn to her husband: "A pig has more humanity in her than that woman does! I don't care how many degrees she has – she is callous and she is blind!" (342) However, Marcia is "all talk, always had been: senseless, ostentatious talk, *words with the sole purpose of scandalously exhibiting themselves*." (343, my italics) However, whereas Delphine's words are intended to conceal their emptiness through the use of complicated

terminology, the emptiness of Marcia's words is concealed *through* their exposure, through their very scandalousness. The words exist only for themselves and for the response they can produce from others, but are separated from experience.

During this dinner party, at which the Swede's parents are present, Marcia finds herself in an argument with Lou Levov over the moral fiber of *Deep Throat* star Linda Lovelace, and what that film's popularity says about the moral state of the country. "[S]ocial conditions may have altered in America since you were taking the kids to eat at the Chinks," Marcia says to Lou, who replies: "This is the morality of a country that we're talking about. Well, isn't it? Am I nuts? It is an affront to decency and to decent people." "And what ... is so inexhaustibly interesting about decency?" says Marcia. She finds decency "overvalued", and rather that it is through transgression one acquires knowledge, invoking what she says is the moral of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and their Fall through eating from the tree of knowledge.[25] "Well that ain't what they taught me ... about the Garden of Eden," says Lou. No, for him, the moral of the story is that "when God above tells you not to do something, you damn well don't do it – that's what. Do it and you pay the piper. Do it and you will suffer from it for the rest of your days." (354-360)

I believe Timothy Parrish is right when he says that Lou Levov wins his argument with Marcia, not necessarily through the force of his argument, but through the novel's structure. We have, earlier the same day, along with the Swede, seen the utmost consequence of transgression in the squalor that is Merry's existence. "The final chapter ... is framed so that Umahoff's (sic) superior intellect is inadequate to account for what happened to Merry Levov ... [O]nly Lou's point of view can comprehend the tragedy that is Merry's life." (Parrish [2000] 95)

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[25] The story of the Garden of Eden is invoked in these closing pages as a kind of "explanation" of the novel's sections. "Paradise Remembered" is the Newark of Zuckerman's and the Swede's (innocent) youth, whereas "The Fall" is associated with the acquiring of knowledge of the evils of the world beyond Newark and beyond youth. And we are reading the closing pages of "Paradise Lost" which leave no doubt that the Fall is permanent, that no redemption will be had.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the American trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman realizes two important things about what it means to be alive, to be human:

Firstly: The final two sentences of *American Pastoral* are questions. And presumably they are asked by Zuckerman, as he finally steps out of his reverie: "What is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" (*Pastoral* 423) The answer is that they have not done anything more reprehensible than being alive and trying their best. The closest thing to reprehensible the Levovs – along with Coleman and Ira and Zuckerman himself – have done, is to believe that they could contain the chaos of existence by buying into a naïve American myth. True, they have transgressed against the will of the father, but that is a necessary step to make in order to reach the new level of enlightenment that is being an adult. (Thus the will of Lou, the Jewish father, can be read as a metaphor for the will of God in the Garden of Eden; a first time, and probably last, in a Roth novel.) As Marcia Umanoff says, without transgression there is not much knowledge; but Marcia does not realize that enlightenment comes at a cost, because transgression is not just a theoretical construction – it comes with a degree of human mess.

Zuckerman has eventually learned that he cannot shield himself – in his pastoral, the hermit's shack – from the consequences of his own transgressions. In his pursuit of knowledge that will enlighten his fiction, he is opening himself up to the possibly dire consequences of attaining that knowledge. We see it most nakedly in his encounter with Les Farley, where Zuckerman realizes that his reclusiveness is about to be left behind forever: "The *fact* of [Farley] drew me on. This was not speculation. This was not meditation. This was not that way of thinking that is fiction writing. This was the thing itself." (*Stain* 349-350) To know for Zuckerman is the same as to write fiction. That is the only way he knows how to know. Prior to the American trilogy, attaining that knowledge had wrecked all of his relationships, both to family, lovers and friends. In the American trilogy, he tries to live without human relationships, but at the end of *The Human Stain*, he is ready to re-engage with the world. Possibly writing a new kind of fiction; one that is both in the service of art and in the service of human relationships.

Secondly: Zuckerman's other insight can be summed up in one sentence: "The truths about us are endless. As are the lies." That realization is what gives Zuckerman's narratives their validity; that is what gives him the opportunity to "remember" the Swede's and Coleman's life. Any attempt to describe the metafictional level and the narrative strategy in the novels easily gets caught up in vague terminology – for instance Derek Parker-Royal's "reimagination" and Mark Maslan's "disembodied dialogue", and the terms I have borrowed from J. Hillis Miller and Walter Benjamin: involuntary memory which is like forgetting, and remembering as opposed to experiencing. These terms are all rather imprecise, and they are so because they attempt to describe a process that is more mystical than logical. Perhaps it suffices to call it an *ambivalent* process. It is through this ambivalent narrative device that Roth manages to merge his initial "solution" to the problem of writing American fiction – turning to the self – with his initial challenge – making credible American reality. By writing a narrative about the last half century of American life through the well-known Zuckerman, he manages to merge Zuckerman's destiny with the destinies of three archetypal American characters, three American Adams. However, by not asserting that Zuckerman is in possession of the Truth, Roth manages to capture the ambivalence of existence; the ambivalence that is the result of the impossibility of seeing any causality between the events that lead up to one's final destiny. *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* are the most successful because Roth keeps this ambivalence at the forefront of the narrative throughout both novels. But in *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman is as certain of the validity of his narrative as the McCarthyists were of their blacklists, depriving the novel of this fruitful ambivalence.

In the trilogy, Zuckerman's destiny is not only intertwined with the destinies of his three protagonists, the entire half-century becomes encapsulated in the worldview of Zuckerman. In other words, he *is* the thematic basis of this "loose thematic trilogy". ("McGrath Interview") In this way, Roth rewrites the previous Zuckerman fictions – the telling of the stories of the Swede and Coleman becomes for Zuckerman a declaration of failure with regard to his own moral stance, namely that of placing art above all other concerns.

Furthermore, the "villains" in the trilogy are those who pretend to *know*, who assert that their truth is the one and only. The best example is perhaps how Delphine Roux sets Coleman reeling with her anonymous note to him, which simply reads:

"Everyone knows". Thinks Zuckerman: "*Everyone knows* … Oh, stupid, stupid, stupid Delphine Roux. One's truth is known to no one and frequently … to oneself least of all." (*Stain* 330) In the historical events that are intertwined with the stories of Swede, Ira and Coleman, it is the representatives of ideologies – of both Left and Right – that claim to hold the key to Truth who are the architects of the Fall on the grander scale.

"One's truth is known … to oneself least of all," says Zuckerman: The Swede, Coleman and Ira believe the fictions they create about their lives to be true; or rather, they think that if they believe hard enough, their lives will turn into the fictions. Zuckerman has learned that life does not work that way; and in the end, the only one who can turn the Swede's, Coleman's and Ira's lives into fiction is Nathan Zuckerman.

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